

Graphic design vs. style, globalism, criticism, science, authenticity and humanism

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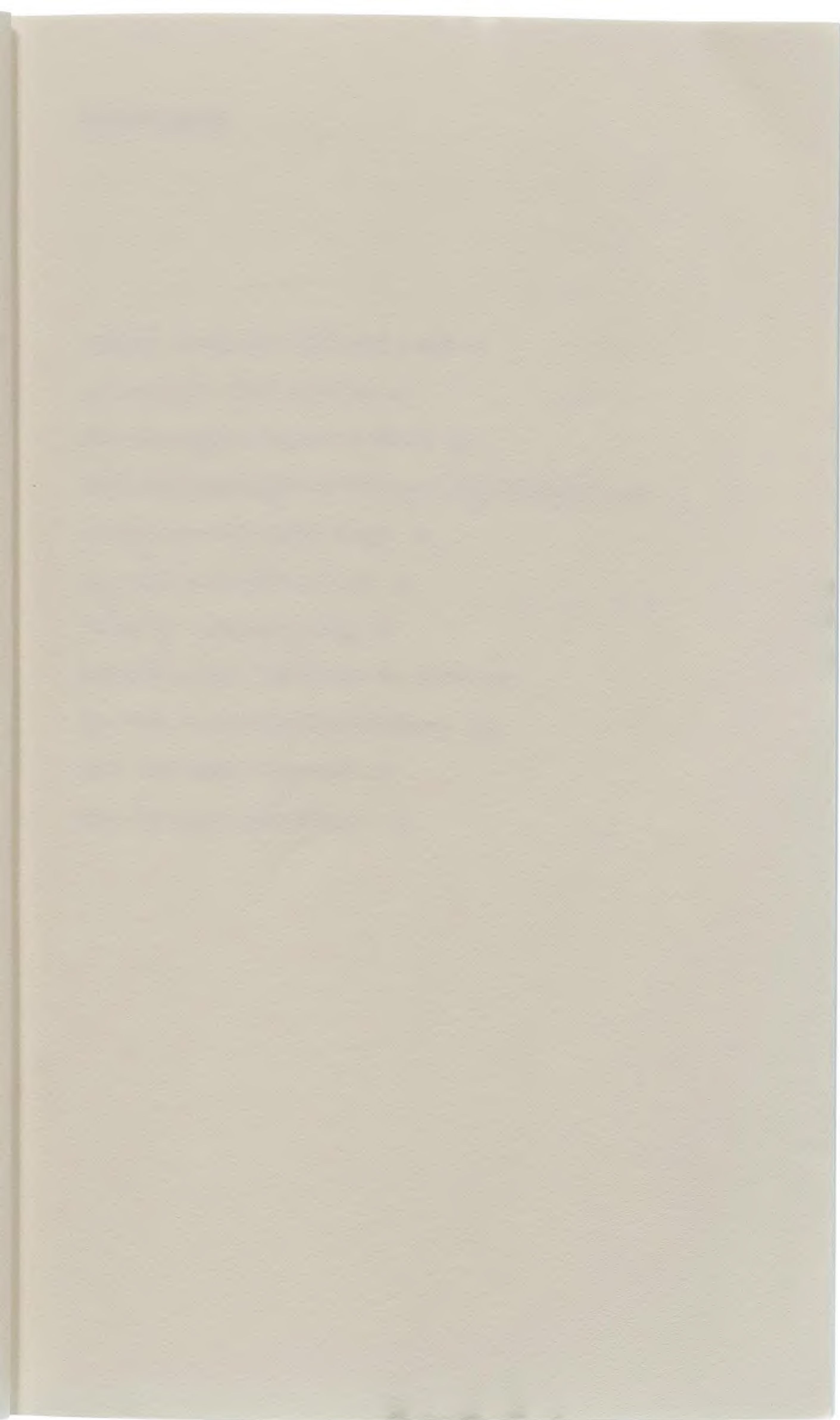
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1. The first of the two main parts of the book is devoted to a general survey of the history of the subject.

2. The second part is devoted to a detailed study of the various theories and methods of the subject.

3. The third part is devoted to a critical examination of the various theories and methods of the subject.

4. The fourth part is devoted to a study of the various theories and methods of the subject.

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11. The eleventh part is devoted to a study of the various theories and methods of the subject.

The “personal” is crucial now not because it stands in contradistinction to globalization, because it doesn’t really. Globalization is everywhere—within and outside our skin. No, personal perspective is important because it brings the designer into design—the human being into the problem.

— MICHAEL SCHMIDT

HELLO MS. HERNANDEZ

Michael Schmidt

Globalization is the story of big winners and bigger losers, where international trade and “free trade” agreements, like NAFTA, demand the removal of national trade barriers—such as tariffs, subsidies, and quotas—in exchange for the free flow of goods, services, and investment from one market to another. Globalization places millions of people in developing and least developed nations at the mercy of bad deals and even worse transnational corporate “governance.”

THINGS DO FALL APART. And maybe graphic design today seems as though it’s lost all cohesion—a nebulous endeavor in a sea of influence, complicity, corporate agendas, and personal cries for creative expression above the din of branded communications. Media-saturated, technology-integrated, and multifaceted, the worst mistake we can make now is to assume all these appearances of multiplicity signify actual diversity. If design today is so thinly spread we can no longer taste the butter, then that’s because globalization—that distributed network of all distributed networks—has so darkened the spheres of human exchange that we can scarcely spot the edge of its shadow behind the products and services we exchange, particularly visual communications. No, diversity is the last thing we can claim when mega-corporations monopolize everything from retail stores to water supplies. Instead, we need a unique dialogue that explores the implicit connections between graphic designers’ aspirations and globalization’s agendas if we are to comprehend our complicity, as visual communicators, in the advancement of globalization, from which point more of us—I hope—will contest free trade. For efficacy’s sake, this dialogue may begin with the underrepresented perspectives of those whose experiences convey the inequities of globalization, wilting the allure and varnished sheen of our branded communications with the smell and stain of sweat labor.

Ms. JOSEFINA HERNANDEZ sat with her hands folded across her lap. Months of intimidation and beatings rested now within her quiet confidence. She came to share a story of courage about how she, and dozens of women, unionized their labor force of textile workers in a fight for fair wages and safer working and environmental conditions. The only union prior to this strike represented the management.

The story's setting is Puebla, Mexico: a dangerous place, like so many other factory regions in Ms. Hernandez's country. Here, women aren't at risk only when they dare to speak out against labor oppression; they're vulnerable any time they leave the shelter of home or factory. They are preyed upon, and they have disappeared by the hundreds—raped, beaten, and murdered. Here, women routinely disappear in the dust.

Ms. Hernandez spoke, the translator spoke, we listened. Through all the horrific details of the violence endured during the strike, her expression rarely changed—this was no performance, after all. She had been through far too much.

Ms. Hernandez's frail finances and tenuous personal security fell apart when she and her co-workers struck. But she rebuilt her life as she sacrificed for the collective. Today, the unnatural blue river alongside the factory, tainted with the run-off dye of jeans assembled for Gap, Calvin Klein, Guess, Levis, and Lee, no longer receives factory-injected cerulean toxins—part of the bargain struck between her employers and the union she helped form: one of her country's only unions for textile workers.

Hello Ms. Hernandez. Welcome to Memphis, Tennessee: the distribution hub of Los Estados Unidos, the distributed network of all distributed networks.

Accompanying Ms. Hernandez on her lecture circuit was Mr. Huberto Juárez Núñez, an economics professor from the Universidad Autónoma de Puebla. Together they formed an object lesson in word and image. Mr. Juárez brought a laptop with charts and

graphs. He delivered facts and figures on NAFTA that demonstrated the damage the free trade agreement caused the Mexican economy and the lives of workers and their families. Ms. Hernandez was a testament to the latter—a visual and visceral connection between Mr. Juárez's figures and the reality of life in Puebla. They sat side by side, like co-determinates: the personal and the factual, the qualitative and the quantitative. They spoke in delicate balance.

GRAPHIC DESIGNERS strike their own delicate balance between their personal creative needs and the public communications demands of their constituencies. We can recognize several points within design history where such needs converged or diverged, with greater or lesser success: William Morris's love for the Gothic era combined with John Ruskin's social politics to form books, textiles, and furniture that evoked the spirit of a communal age for a price only the elite could afford. Peter Behrens's adoption of the grid fit well with the Deutsche Werkbund's support for standardized design as a means to German economic development—a principle that was, tragically, applied to the machinery of war, but also to peacetime economic recovery. And Walter Gropius's responses to his personal experiences of the First World War found refuge in the Bauhaus's Platonic rationality of triangles, circles, and squares, forming foundations curricula, design processes, and even commercial products—a few of which, most notably children's blocks, are still sold today. On the other hand, Ed Fella had to leave commercial practice altogether to follow his muse and, intriguingly, influence a young generation of designers.

For either convergence or divergence, timing is everything. With hindsight we can see why Ed Fella's period of initial influence was a good time to fall apart and attempt reorganization: The postmodern project captured the enthusiasm of designers who were dissatisfied with the *status quo*, Republican

economics, Christian moral “majorities,” and a general us-them mentality that has, frighteningly, reached its nadir in George-The-Younger’s War on Terror. But more simply, students were then and are now dissatisfied with the dull assembly lines that await their creative intellects.

The “personal” is crucial now not because it stands in contradiction to globalization, because it doesn’t really. Globalization is everywhere—within and outside our skin. No, personal perspective is important because it brings the designer into design—the human being into the problem.

If the personal creative needs of individual designers can converge with their responses to globalization’s injustices, and hence diverge from the impulse to ignore complex arguments, then design will find cohesion in a new dialogue on equity. The plethora of issues we discussed in the Nineties, fondly memorialized by recent contributors to these pages, will later be recalled as the starting points in a discussion briefly interrupted by the dormancy we now bemoan.

THE TENNESSEE INDUSTRIAL RENEWAL NETWORK must have understood the motivating force of personal perspective when its board invited several members of the local Memphis community to join the guests from Mexico. Addressing their small audience of teachers, peace and justice activists, religious leaders, and environmentalists, the diverse panel shared seemingly unconnected personal experiences of inequity that, upon wider discussion, revealed several intrinsic similarities—across race, gender, income, and borders. Reaching these connections, however, wasn’t easy.

Our steel chairs creaked, punctuating the cavernous silence. The complexity of the challenge, and the realization that any one of us would have to know quite a lot about globalization, economics, current events, trade laws, labor injustices, etc., to connect these stories, demonstrated how globalization engulfs

our daily lives while daunting us with the threat of ineffability. Fortunately, we sat there long enough to discover that the knotted complexities of global trade could be restrung into a cat's cradle of connections—tying together experiences from far and wide.

Hello Ms. Hernandez. Welcome to Orange Mound.

Cargo jets pounded the roof of the community center as they arrived from and departed to destinations across country and oceans. Just shy of the runways of Memphis International Airport, the home of the FedEx fleet, we listened to the panelists recount stories of land dispossession, union busting, and contamination.

I had been here a few times before, in this part of town called Orange Mound: a large collection of tiny but well kept homes and lawns jammed together amidst churches and industrial decay. My kids and I helped plant a community garden here. I was told the lot for the garden was hard to find. Empty lots, I learned, are easy to find. But empty lots without lead in the soil are tough to come by in Orange Mound. Was this because of prior dumping, previous manufacturing sites, or maybe the constant exhaust from arriving and departing planes? No one was sure. I recalled Ms. Hernandez's cerulean blue river. Orange and blue: complementary colors, but hardly opposite ends of the spectrum in this light.

Things fall apart, but they also fall together. The question is, when they fall together, will they form a more sustainable way of life?

"Way of life": these words sound so fluid together. I consider my career part of my "way of life," just as surely as Ms. Hernandez's employment affects the whole of her life. She doesn't have the option of leaving her job behind when she heads home. Oppression doesn't rest. And while I have met extremely successful designers who insist they don't wish to "see" themselves in their work, claiming they are more than just graphic designers, I've never heard them say it's only a job.

SECOND TO ARCHITECTURE, typography embodies “the most characteristic picture of a period, and the strongest testimonial of the spiritual progress” and “development of a people.”¹ This statement by Peter Behrens is echoed throughout the course of design history. Common to each of the statement’s iterations is the implication that our way of life as designers—particularly what we produce while fulfilling this way of life—expresses the spirit of the times.

Despite its ethnographic and semiotic logic, Behrens’s statement bestows quite a mystical attribute upon designers: a shaman-like power to make form from smoke, voice from wind, and objects from dust. Spiritual progress and human development are the smoke, wind, and dust that, transformed through the “testimonials” of design, become the steps, walkways, and doorways to comprehending, articulating, and sharing our progress. But these testimonials also commodify, package, and distribute our progress—transforming knowledge to be shared into products to be sold. This transformation, exploited by free trade globalization, turns life-saving drugs into high-priced commodities, the traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples into the intellectual property of foreign corporations, and the promise of the developed world’s manufacturing expertise into poor-paying Third World assembly line jobs. These might not be the points we like to dwell upon, because they don’t elevate our enterprise—whether that enterprise is global capitalism or graphic design.

Even today, for all those postmodern barbs thrown into the side of modernism, graphic designers still defend their field on the grounds that good design is, by God, of great social importance. I’m not here to challenge that contention, just to point out that the argument itself fails to question the processes of global economic development that generate the demands for our “good” design. Postmodern critiques did, certainly, advance this question; I merely reiterate. However, the economic and technological boom

of the mid-Nineties undercut the already difficult case for redirecting a field that has done such a remarkable job following free trade across the globe. Ours is not a field that likes to be left behind, least of all fall apart, no matter whom we have to cozy up with to advance our interests.

Take, for example, the strange bedfellow of Icograda (The International Council of Graphic Design Associations). Icograda is rather proud of its consultative status with the UN's World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). If WIPO gets its way, it will become a valuable resource in the advancement of free trade globalization—the mechanism that encumbered Ms. Hernandez's way of life. The organization is presently developing the Substantive Patent Law Treaty, which will create one global patent system, enabling transnational pharmaceutical and bio-engineering corporations to circumvent the efforts of developing nation governments, whose defenses of public health and future food supplies often require the denial of corporate-owned intellectual property protections on lifesaving drugs and bio-engineered seeds.²

Icograda has formed a relationship with an organization that supports free trade globalization at the expense of sick and hungry people in the poorest of nations. Most of the connections between design and globalization aren't so obvious. It's clear, though, that many influential designers want to see design at the head of the globalization beast rather than swinging from its tail.

We have failed to acknowledge that what we voice, through the lion's share of graphic design's billable hours, is nothing more and nothing less than globalization's many missives. Globalization is "our times," as it was when Behrens wrote his influential statement in the early twentieth century. Globalization was nothing new then, of course. In fact, Marx and Engels penned a description of globalization in 1848 that could have been written yesterday. You'll find this startlingly prescient discussion contained within the many pages of *The Communist Manifesto*.

Fortunately, there is a critical life for design after postmodernism. Something is changing. Practitioners, educators, and students are becoming savvier about the connection between global trade and social and economic injustice. Moreover, their motivations to connect these realizations with their design practices are as deeply personal as they are public.

Susan Barber, Scott Stowell, and Sheila Levrant de Bretteville's work for the Not in Our Name campaign brought public attention to a vast community of protest in the wake of George W. Bush's declaration of war on terror. This year, globalization is a central theme of the Design History Society's international conference in Belfast. The Cardiff Group, based in Wales, is dedicated to employing design for the benefit of low-income communities. Listservs provided by Design in Development and the Design Research Society discuss facets of globalization on a regular basis. Colette Gaiter's recent work on Emory Douglas, the prolific graphic designer of Black Panther publications, recalls the struggles for equality and justice akin to Ms. Hernandez's fight. And Icograda—yes, I know I just bashed it—established Design for the World in collaboration with the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design and the International Federation of Interior Architects/Interior Designers. Design for the World, founded in 1998, applies the expertise of its members to disaster relief, health, education, development, and AIDS.³

I think we get the idea: the conversation isn't dead. But what we do need is a dialogue that can bring these activities into sharper focus, explore globalization's effects, and investigate design's complicity in promulgating free trade. This isn't a matter of good or bad clients, global trade or no global trade. It's a matter of fairness. Most globalization opponents are not against trade, just unfair exchange.

MS. HERNANDEZ HAD A LONG TRIP AHEAD. Several more lecture stops still stood between her and Miami, where she planned to attend the FTAA (Free Trade Agreement of the Americas) protests.

Mr. Juárez was selling his book along the way. I was curious, but hesitated before buying it. I thought his book might be a tome of Mexican economics, filled with the graphs, bar charts, and figures he stored in his laptop. I could handle such material as long as it was written in English, but Mr. Juárez writes and speaks in Spanish. Nonetheless, I approached the boxes I assumed held his fat books, but instead I found dozens of thin paperbacks, quiet and yet confident, which told the story of Ms. Hernandez and the women who worked with her to establish their union.

Mr. Juárez's book, entitled *Rebellión en el Greenfield*, is a document of the personal and the collective, commingling elements of a diary, scrapbook, and the economic history of the community. Photos document bits of the nine-month strike, while photocopied medical records tell of broken craniums, lacerations, broken limbs and other injuries suffered by the women during the walkout.⁴

I had already studied globalization prior to meeting our visitors. But listening to Ms. Hernandez made me realize something new. For all the academic means we can employ to discuss globalization, the only way I can see our field achieving a more substantial understanding of the relationship between globalization and design, is if we first come to the subject with a personal and highly impassioned caring for the welfare of those afflicted by injustice and a respect for those who have fought such inequity.

Hello Ms. Hernandez.

- 1 Philip B. Meggs, *A History of Graphic Design*, 3rd ed., pg. 223, New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1998.
- 2 See "One Global Patent System: WIPO's Substantive Patent Law Treaty," Genetic Resources Action International, <http://www.grain.org/publications/wipo-splt-2003-en.cfm>, October 2003, web-posted.
- 3 Design for the World, www.designfortheworld.org
- 4 Huberto Juárez Nuñez, *Rebelión en el Greenfield*, Puebla, Mexico: Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 2002.

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An interview with

PETER BILAK

RUDY VANDERLANS: I asked you this question in Rome during the ATypI, when we first met: as a person born and raised in Slovakia, do you ever feel you should perhaps be practicing design in your home country right now? You could be part of the new generation of designers helping to build a prosperous Slovak Republic. Right now they may need you more there than in Holland, a country that seems to be crawling with great designers.

PETER BILAK: This question kept me busy for a while. After my stay in the UK and the US, and after finishing my studies in Paris, I had returned and worked for a year or so in Bratislava at a large agency. Then, after my first year in the Netherlands, I returned to Prague and worked there for a couple of months. Both experiences were useful, but I finally decided to focus on my main interests: type, graphic, and editorial design. I thought I could do it better in the Netherlands. It is complicated. I don't mean to suggest that Dutch design is better, but I had the impression that in Slovakia or the Czech Republic, I spent most of the time explaining what graphic design is, and I didn't have much energy to actually practice it, let alone do something interesting.

Also, there is this Slavic attitude, which is lovely when visiting but difficult when trying to seriously work there; a heaviness that Kundera describes in the *Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Many people have a kind of self-destructive mechanism built into them, which makes it difficult to argue with them, or to have relationships that are not just emotional in nature. In the Netherlands I acquired spontaneity of expression and became more productive.

But in the end it makes little difference where I live. Right now it makes sense to work in a position that allows me to develop my interests. Without being sentimental or pretentious, I think I can be more helpful to my home country by doing work I believe in. I have a lot of contacts back there and I do some unofficial advising to students from the Art Academy in Bratislava. I occasionally give talks and I am involved in some projects there. I don't think I would have the expertise to do this if I had stayed at home.

RUDY: Holland is currently facing a big dilemma regarding its foreign population of guest workers, asylum seekers, immigrants from its former colonies of Surinam and Indonesia, designers who flock there, etc. It's a very small country, and there seems to be a limit to the tolerance of the Dutch for accommodating all these people. As a foreigner in Holland yourself, do you ever encounter any animosity directed at you?

PETER: No, I haven't. Or maybe I developed some immunity towards animosity. Or maybe the cliché about Dutch tolerance has some foundation in the truth. I see hostile feelings towards immigrants more often in other countries.

RUDY: How did you end up living and working in Holland? Can you give us a quick history?

PETER: I started my studies at the Art Academy in Bratislava, participated in exchange programs in the UK and US, did an MA program in Paris, then returned to Slovakia for a year to work in this agency I mentioned. I got a big salary, a car, etc., but I really disliked my work.

Johanna, my girlfriend, lived in France at that time. When our apartment in Bratislava burned down, I quit my job, moved to the Netherlands, and came to Maastricht where I received a grant to study at the Jan van Eyck Academy. There was no plan to stay there. I actually had some plans to work in Prague, but as I started new projects, it just made sense to stay in Holland. After the Jan van Eyck, I was asked to work at Studio Dumbar in The Hague, where I now live with Johanna. So, basically, I never decided to live in the Netherlands; I'm just postponing leaving.

RUDY: This is perhaps a crass question, but how do you make a living? You design and distribute fonts, which is very work-intensive, especially since you specialize in text fonts, which require a lot of investment of time up-front. You also publish

a small magazine, *DotDotDot*, which I'd imagine isn't exactly a gold mine and also requires a lot of work. And you do some commercial work and teaching. Are you living a comfortable life? Or is it a constant struggle to make ends meet? Or is that simply unimportant, and being able to do meaningful work, work that you truly believe in, outweighs any discomfort in your life style?

PETER: How I make my living is a miracle for me, too. After starting on my own, in a foreign country—whose language I still haven't mastered very well—and not having any foundations here, of course moments of uncertainty appear. I still don't understand why is it that as soon as I finish one project, another comes along. But in the end it always works out well. The activities you mention are sort of equally divided, although currently I spend more time designing and producing type.

There seems to be a concept that one must suffer spiritually and aesthetically in order to satisfy material needs, and vice versa. In design, this shows up as a dichotomy between daily and after-hours work. The former pays the bills, the latter satisfies the individual creativity. It creates a schizophrenic attitude in a person, not being able to focus on either one. Of course, it doesn't have to be this way. The idea of wealth is a mental concept that we create ourselves. I find comfortable living important, but I wouldn't want it to guide my life's decisions. I try to do the work I like during the day.

RUDY: People often start magazines because they have a need to fill what they perceive is a hole in the market. Did this come into play when you and Stuart Bailey started *DotDotDot*? Was there a magazine that you felt was missing, a niche that *DotDotDot* could fill?

PETER: Both Stuart and I had some experience with writing for other magazines or designing them before we started *DotDotDot*, so we focused more on how we could better combine design and writing than looking for models to follow, or filling gaps in pub-

lishing. *DotDotDot* follows in the tradition of independent publications, but there were no ideas about positioning the magazine, just an interest to do something and continue to reinvent it regularly. It's a small publication, so we don't have to try too hard to appeal to an audience. We print only 3,000 copies, and those somehow spread around the world. We often emphasize that we don't have any editorial policy, no design philosophy, or a school of thought that we practice. It may sound like we're avoiding any discussions about our motivation, but in fact the actual process of making the magazine is the real motivation. For us, *DotDotDot* cannot be defined by a single description. If it does, it becomes stifled and we should do something about it. I suppose it is mainly about development. As we finish one issue, we know that another one will be coming. Only now, after about four years of work, has it become something we feel more comfortable with.

RUDY: What is your favorite issue, and why?

PETER: I just spoke to Stuart, who made the observation that *DotDotDot* seems the opposite of most avant-garde/underground/eccentric/independent publications. It started off weak and got better. The normal pattern is to start with a lot of energy and enthusiasm, then get tired. Some sort of turning point came when we started thinking laterally, as in any good design, and as with any good idea. From about issue #4 onwards, which is when *DotDotDot* started to really change, we stopped thinking in terms of "what pieces should a graphic design magazine contain" and started thinking "whatever we decide to include makes it a graphic design magazine, if that's what we still choose to call it."

RUDY: What role does Robin Kinross play in *DotDotDot*? He is listed as editorial adviser. How involved is he in the magazine?

PETER: Robin used to help us with his thorough proofreading of the magazine, and also by giving us his opinion when Stuart and I

disagreed about something. He counterbalanced our naivete and “winging it” approach. We had no experience with editing, and not that much with writing. His input has been immensely useful, and we are glad he has done this tiring work. But he stopped advising after issue #7.

RUDY: I have a few questions about your short essay in *DotDotDot* #6 entitled “History of a New Font.” In it you state that “typefaces designed to fulfill the needs of their times contribute their small part to the knowledge accumulated across the centuries by extending and adapting collective knowledge to contemporary conditions.” They extend history. Whereas revivals, you write, “are unrelated to contemporary demands,” they discontinue history and stop progress. They are “ahistorical,” and therefore “fail to participate in the big story.” First, what made you write this essay? Second, how does Fedra, which is perhaps one of your most successful font families to date, fulfill the needs of our time?

PETER: This text was an extension of the Fedra design project. Type design is a long, meditative process. It takes a lot of time to arrive at certain results, so obviously some thinking takes place. A project like this also forces you to think about the motivation for making type today. I was interested in seeing if there is a more autonomous reason for making type, one that is not just explained as problem solving.

In any art discipline, you can note some discoveries that are absorbed by others, as they recognize their value. For example, in the history of painting the inventions of perspective, abandoning of figuration, introduction of multiple perspectives, etc., are accumulated techniques that are being used to even greater effect by artists today.

It is possible to see this cumulative progress in type design as well, although probably less explicitly, because it's somewhat obscured by technological progress.

Fedra, too, contains its share of history. Some influences are fairly clear. For instance, I borrowed certain ideas about italics from Jean Jannon, a 17th century type designer, but I also took ideas explored by Gerard Unger, a contemporary type designer.

But there's something more important at play. Since it is difficult to predict how fonts will be used today—what size, which medium of reproduction, etc.—Fedra had to be adapted to work for both print and screen, small and large sizes, high and low resolution. These are all contemporary issues. Of course, the font still has its limitations, but it is not directly repeating the past, nor is it predicting future trends. It is simply the product of now. While this is a very obvious idea, it is often disregarded, as we are so concerned with both the future and the past. Products whose main concern is now are often still very useful tomorrow. Now is the only real time to consider when working.

RUDY: Maybe I'm not understanding you. What you describe above relates mostly to type design as a problem-solving enterprise. But you started off by mentioning that you were "interested to see if there is a more autonomous reason for making type, one that is not just explained as problem-solving." What were you trying to get at?

PETER: Fedra was the typeface where I started thinking of these issues, but perhaps it is not the best example of this more autonomous, self-conscious way of working with type. Currently I am working on a new typeface that came out of my proposal for the Twin Cities type—a typeface that reflects different historical periods by borrowing their formal attributes. Sort of many fonts in one, but still united by the same proportions and skeleton. While Fedra still has to respond functionally to the situations where it is used, this new typeface gets away completely from problem-solving issues.

RUDY: One of the most amazing stories I've ever heard in regard to type design, is the fact that you had almost finished Fedra Sans and then your studio was broken into and your computer was stolen and you had to redraw the font based on some printouts you had. Can you elaborate on this story? It must have been devastating, but I wonder if there was a silver lining to the experience.

PETER: Silver lining!? It was the ultimate nightmare for a designer. From one day to the next I lost about three to four months worth of work when both of my computers—including the one used for backup—were stolen. It's a good story, but it was not very funny at the moment.

Of course I lost other work as well, so I didn't work on fonts for some time. I was busy recreating other design work that had to be sent to the printer. When I finally had the time to think what to do with Fedra, I realized that together with the font files, I had lost some of its problems. For example, I had noticed earlier that it would have been better if the italic had a different angle. But I had invested so much time in the design that I was very hesitant to redraw it. So the accident freed me to reconsider some early design decisions, most of which were made because the fonts were originally to be used in a very specific context. Of course that delayed the release date significantly, but I do believe that Fedra benefited from this incident.

RUDY: Eureka, one of the first text fonts you designed and which is released by FontShop, is a typeface that you have more or less denounced, saying it was a sophomoric effort. But the font is still being sold. How do you feel about seeing it in use? For instance, what did you think of the use of Eureka in Rick Poynor's latest book *No More Rules*?

PETER: I am quite comfortable with the basic weights of Eureka. It is mainly the bold versions that suffer from my inexperience at the time. I haven't seen *No More Rules*, but I have seen some other

applications that were quite fine, such as the identity for the Dutch Minister-President and an MIT book on Central European avant gardes. Other uses were rather awful, such as *ONE* magazine. It is not an easy typeface to use, but when played with, it can have a pleasant appearance. I do like its fragility compared to the sturdy feel of Fedra.

Being a micro-foundry, I have very close contacts with the users of my fonts, which allows me to optimize, complete, and extend the typeface when needed. If I feel that the type doesn't perform satisfactorily, I fix it. Those updates become free to all existing users.

I released several updates of Fedra, a font that is only a few years old. I often thought that Eureka could benefit from some updating, but I am less likely to do it because I don't have any direct contacts with its users. Maybe it's a good thing, so I can concentrate on new projects rather than redoing past ones.

RUDY: I noticed your own site lists only a handful of fonts. But you have designed quite a few fonts for the FontFont line, such as HolyCow, Atlanta, Craft, and a series of Dirty Faces. Are you distancing yourself from these early experiments? Is there a particular reason you only sell Fedra on your own site?

PETER: Yes, I suppose it is a natural development. It was important to do those early experiments, but my interests are elsewhere now. If I were to show these fonts on my typothèque web site, I probably wouldn't offer them for sale. As part of FontShop, they are a public memory of the period when they were made.

I like the idea of the opus in classical music. It is a numbered series authorized by the composer, excluding stylistic exercises, or early experiments that do not qualify and are not numbered. For me Fedra is opus 2. The fonts you mentioned are the experiments. There will be more fonts available on typothèque, but it will take some time. I'm in no hurry.

RUDY: Do you in any way feel like we may be on the cusp of a new era in type design? After this rush of font production in the 90s, where everybody was able to make a “working” font in a matter of days on their personal computer, it now seems with the introduction of OpenType that the circle is closing again, making type design very work-intensive once more, and highly specialized. Have we seen the end of the great democratization of type design? And if so, is that a good thing or a bad thing?

PETER: I don’t think it is a circle. It’s hard to go back to the methods of the old days. OpenType offers possibilities that only very few designers take advantage of. I have made OpenType fonts containing some 1,500 glyphs for a dictionary project, but I doubt it would be very useful for an average user.

I think the mentality of type designers is slowly changing. Those early fonts were all based on relativistic arguments, then it started to all look alike, and as a response, in order to differentiate their work, many designers started to produce very complicated types, like OpenType fonts.

RUDY: About the design of *DotDotDot*. Looking at all the issues, they feel like a mishmash of styles and page designs that resemble non-designerly, generic trade, or academic science magazines, or even fanzines. And I believe this is what you intended, because in your introductory essay in issue #1 on page 2, you, the editors, wrote that “any tendency towards ‘generic’ or ‘default’ typography may seem conceited, but has a genuine foundation in wanting to avoid overdesigning.” You set out with this specific approach because “looking at other magazines from all fields it seems that ‘serious’ content-driven publications don’t care much how they look, whilst ‘superficial’ content-free ones resort to visual pyrotechnics.” I know there’s some who say that it’s not productive to discuss style, but when we met in The Hague a few years back, you told me that you and Stuart sometimes spend hours choosing just

the right font for an essay in order to evoke those very particular effects that you're after, so I figured it's only fair to discuss this topic. My question is, by giving *DotDotDot* this very specific look that mimics non-designerly, content-driven magazines, aren't you concerned you may be creating the kind of progress-stopping pastiche that you criticize in your "History of a New Font" essay?

PETER: You might notice that the latest issue, *DotDotDot* #7, is very different from the early ones. But you are right. At the beginning the idea was not to attach a single style to the magazine. But this turned against us and made it look like we were trying to mimic non-designerly magazines. Although we don't really spend hours looking for fonts that capture some emotional effect, we do design the magazine very, very consciously. We look for the right balance and decide what's really important. Sometimes the typeface is important and sometimes it is not.

We're trying to overcome the duality of form and content now. Each issue has a set of ideas and overlapping themes that emerge from the content. The design is the result of these individual pieces bound into a whole. We do hope that *DotDotDot* doesn't have a fixed look, since it doesn't have a fixed content.

One of my favorite spreads is in #6. It consists of two full-page full-color pictures of the same bird, each showing the bird in a slightly different position. It's an introductory spread for an article entitled "The Field Guide." Without reading the text it makes little sense; you only get the complete picture once you've read the piece. We try for *DotDotDot* to be read as well as looked at. Without reading it, the design is difficult to consider.

RUDY: Besides the fact that *DotDotDot* gives you a platform to experiment, what is its ultimate purpose? Some people have expressed high hopes for *DotDotDot* as an alternative design magazine. But it would be easy to dismiss it as a magazine that simply showcases the esoteric and eclectic taste in articles of two individuals who happen to be graphic designers. Why should we care?

PETER: *DotDotDot* does express a rather personal meeting point of a small group of people, but it doesn't have, and never did have, a "purpose." If we stated something contrary in our pilot issue, it was only because the first issues were diluted by too many compromises. We've tried several times to have an editorial statement, but the most accurate one (Stuart's favorite) was on page 1 of issue #4. It's a clumsy cartoon of a broken go-cart with the caption "The Master Plan." This describes us perfectly. It would be suspicious to have a clear statement of purpose. If there ever is, it comes only *after* the event, after an issue is published.

DotDotDot is, as you say, esoteric/eclectic. Since many people have eclectic tastes, especially those working within the arts, they could care. To us it just seems a very human way of working, rather than forcing ourselves to follow some arbitrary predetermined plan.

RUDY: I couldn't resist asking you one of the questions from the list of questions that you ask your students at the course you teach at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague, question 9: "Is it good for people to stretch and reach into inconvenient places?"

PETER: These questions, inspired by Norman Potter, which I usually ask at the beginning of the semester, are designed to call attention to certain patterns of life. So there is no right answer. I find pattern-recognition an important aspect of design. The list of questions is geared to make students observe themselves and others, and is a simple exercise, but I hope it leads to a process of questioning. Teaching is a difficult subject. I don't have much experience with it, so I am still experimenting and learning a lot.

RUDY: What's a valuable lesson you have learned from teaching?

PETER: I learned some Dutch, for one thing. Also, I said that teaching was a difficult subject, because the longer I teach, the more complicated it gets. Last year I was thinking a lot about the role

of the teacher, school system, marks and grades, and that everyone intuitively knows that the best students are often those who nearly fail. I'm a little bothered by the aspects of teaching that are based on imitation, so I try to push students into developing their own criteria for working, rather than looking for the teacher's approval. I also learned that education is not the same as skills training, and that thinking is not separate from working.

RUDY: That leads perfectly to my last question. With all the writing, thinking, editing, and teaching you do, is there ever a risk to “overthink” what you do? In other words, does all this theory ever hinder what you do in practice? Do you ever wish you could just forget about all that stuff for a minute and just create purely intuitively?

PETER: This makes me think that perhaps I was not very clear in my previous answers. I rely largely on intuition. That's why I always think that whatever the result is, it could have been completely different. There is no theory that drives my work while I'm in the process of working. It is only when I talk about the work retrospectively, like now, wrapping things up nicely and conveniently, that it all sounds clever and carefully thought out. During the process things are different. It's a constant oscillation between intuition and intellect, never just one or the other. No theory can fully encapsulate the decisions one has to make when drawing type or designing a book. When we work on *DotDotDot*, we often use the phrase “this feels very *DotDotDot*,” which is the only way to convey a particularly good gut feeling about something. Contrary to the beliefs of some, design often operates beyond the rational parts of the brain.

Samples of Peter Bilak's Fedra and other work can be seen at: www.typotheque.com

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As much as we hate to see mass-marketed consumer culture replace rich indigenous cultures, globalism just might be the thing that keeps us from killing each other. It's bad business strategy to decimate one's customers. Too bad it takes the profit motive to make us behave better.

— KATHERINE MCCOY

HYBRIDITY HAPPENS

Katherine McCoy

I CONFESS. I wanted to cover the world with Helvetica: a missionary zeal to fix the mess out there with a transcendent, clean, graphic communication. This would be *good* for everyone, even if it took design police to make it happen. This notion seemed to fit our late-60s idealism—what Lorraine Wild characterizes as “hippie modernism.” Then a few years later, under the spell of Cranbrook’s experimental atmosphere, I became interested in idiosyncratic graphic forms as inspiration for personal design expressions. Many designers have followed this same route.

More recently, in an effort to think more about the audience—the recipients of our graphic communications—I have come to value diverse cultures of visual and verbal languages. The globalization of contemporary corporate design is a dull contrast to the vernacular vigor of indigenous, local, and special interest subcultures. I am interested in how designers can match their graphic expressions with their increasingly specialized audiences, or let their audiences point them to new hybrid sources of graphic expression.

But in a recent correspondence with Rudy VanderLans, he posed an important question regarding this issue. He wrote:

“After reading an interview with Robin Kinross by Andy Crewdson a while back,* I was intrigued by a point Kinross made about the benefits of universalism, and the social aspects of modernism and their reliance upon common agreements. He said that particularly in light of the traumas of recent years of increased national-religious confrontations, universal values would help us come together and solve some of our problems. Kinross admitted that it was perhaps a big jump to make, but it seems to me that he was suggesting that a problem arises when designers make highly personal and/or indigenous work for small audiences/tribes, causing a kind of graphic balkanization.

* <http://new-series.org/?kinross>

Personally, I am torn between this idea of wanting to communicate based on universal values and retaining certain individual and indigenous qualities.

Globalization is such a double-edged sword. Seeing McDonalds on the corner of every major city around the world makes me cringe. I like to eat exotic indigenous foods, just like I enjoy seeing local art and design. Isn't that why we travel?"

As much as we hate to see mass-marketed consumer culture replace rich indigenous cultures, globalism just might be the thing that keeps us from killing each other. It's bad business strategy to decimate one's customers. Too bad it takes the profit motive to make us behave better.

Powerful global connections are expanding continually. It's not hard to envision a day in the not-so-distant future when all Earthlings will speak the same language, and share the same blended physical characteristics—something like modernism's universal man. Communication technologies have incredible reach and people are very mobile at all levels of the economic ladder. Global travel and migration, free trade, and multinational corporation employment cause cultures to mix and peoples to blend.

IN OUR LATE-60S HIPPIE MODERNIST DAYS, we applauded the idea of the global village and saw a connection with 20th century modernism, particularly as manifested in the Swiss graphic design approach. The early modernist pioneers possessed a strong social idealism. They wanted universal design solutions for the international proletariat they envisioned during the early 20th century European political/social revolutions. The Constructivists and some Bauhaus masters (but not all) had fervent hopes for a leveling of the peaks and valleys of European wealth, power, and privilege, eliminating aristocracies and elevating peasants out of serfdom.

This was to happen in partnership with mass production. Early modernism in the teens and twenties saw a symbiotic agreement between mass production, mass societies, and universal design form languages. Industrialization would provide the factories in which the new proletariat would earn good wages, generous enough to buy the products of those factories. These functional products would be designed in suitably universal design forms, based on geometry and composed of materials compatible with those factories' industrial processes.

The strong internationalist urge was certainly a reaction to the horrors of a century of European wars that culminated in WWI. International universalism seemed a solution to the chauvinist nationalism, catalyzed by religious, cultural, and language differences, which created war after war. Allegiance to an international proletariat, Esperanto, Herbert Bayer's typeface Universal, and minimalist design forms all proposed cross-cultural solutions free of oppressive tradition.

Modernism linked efficient mass production, socialism, and internationalism to a reductivist "universal" design language of primary colors, geometry, and unadorned structure. It was a coherent vision, and in the late 60s we cherished a hope that this kind of design could be a unifying force for social good. If we all read our news magazines in perfectly gridded Helvetica, everyone would see politics the same way and conflicts would cease.

Robin Kinross says "The universalist position is to say that we can reach agreement over questions of international justice, and that there is something that reaches over and beyond religious and nationalist beliefs. To move from that kind of political discussion to mere typography is a big jump, and maybe there aren't any good connections to be made. Yet I do still think that the process of reading text is a process in which common agreements are made: this is how human beings understand the sets of visual marks that we call text."

Unfortunately, text and the act of reading seem insufficient to unify the world's cultures with a common bond, particularly when so many cultures hardly read. It would be wonderful to discover an eloquence that transcends individual cultures and subcultures—a universal set of symbols, something like Karl Jung's notion of symbols universally recognized by a collective subconscious. But more recent cognitive psychology, and the communication theories of semiotics and post-structuralism, point out the cultural dependency of nearly all symbols. Symbols, including alphabets, are not natural language with built-in meaning. Their meaning must be learned and exists only within the cultural agreement of a community of like-minded individuals at a specific moment in time.

Communities are expanding their influence, in spite of the globalizing impetus of multinational corporations, communications technology, and international travel. The world is a bubbling soup of cultural differences that both enrich us and cause conflict. The past 40 years have seen the global growth of ethnic awareness and a renewed interest in the preservation of ethnic traditions. Since the civil rights movement of the 1960s, ethnic difference has become a source of pride. This counters a 200-year tradition of assimilation in the United States. While earlier waves of immigrants shed their home country traditions and language as quickly as possible, now new arrivals to the U.S. more often insist on preserving their traditions and languages. This is a global political trend as well. We see cultural groups defined by ethnicity, language, and religion, demanding self-governance in separatist movements all over the world. Even the vast Soviet Union—intended to be the model for the international proletariat—continues to break up into smaller national units of specific cultural groups.

Beyond this, distinct subcultural groups cluster around all kinds of special interests. Proximity used to define communities—

what side of the river you lived on or in what neighborhood. Now, communications technology enables people to knit themselves together through the Internet and targeted communications media and channels, including specialized magazines, cable TV, and music. We see the results everywhere. These subcultures share interests and values, including politics (the NRA and Greens), social and environmental issues (wolf advocates and anti-abortionists), religion (Scientologists and born again Christians), hobbies (railroad fans and bingo players), recreation (ballroom dancers and skateboarders), age groups (Gray Panthers and minivan moms), and music (Hip Hop and Country and Western).

The authentic energy of cultures and subcultures connects members that share values, interests, lifestyles, and symbols. The consequences are both positive and negative. People find a stabilizing sense of belonging in a complex world through participation in cultures and subcultures. But what connects one community separates it from others. This can be isolating, insular, and destructive—the balkanization cited by Rudy Vanderlans, including single-issue voting and conflict between groups. The resurgence of fundamentalism in three world religions creates the current ugliness in international relations.

IT SEEMS THERE ARE TWO OPPOSING—or counterbalancing—models at work in the world. On one hand, we are getting a version of the global village we longed for in the late 60s. On the other hand we have a renewed sense of cultural identity and an explosion of subcultures.

More interesting than a balance of opposites is another model—the idea of cultural hybridity and continuous adaptation. Cultures and subcultures are not fixed and separate entities, cast in concrete and preserved in museums. And individuals typically belong to more than one culture or subculture, with allegiances changing over time. Within a global environment, cultural com-

munities are living networked organisms in rapid flux, evolving far faster than their biological analogues. Communication intensifies this web of continuous change—whether by person to person or mediated by technology. Hybridity is the result when subcultures rub up against each other, appropriating and transforming each other's paradigms. And hybridity happens when a subculture resists the dominant culture.

Prasad Boradkar, professor of industrial design at Arizona State University, studies cultural hybridity. He says “This dialogue of resistance leads to new subcultures. We see creative cultural adjustments rather than cultures dying out.” This process has many stages in continuous cycles. The safety pin was appropriated by punk culture as a sign of resistance, and then adopted and commodified by the dominant culture.

Boradkar is interested in the “ecotone” in which two cultural systems overlap. “This creates an amazing richness in species. Permeable and elastic boundaries create a porous edge condition.” This is where vigorous cultural change happens—the mongrel, the crossbreed, and the vigorous hybrid. The resultant diversity is a necessary biological mechanism for survival, allowing organisms to adapt to external pressures.

He is interested in the continuum between cultural opposites. A rich ambiguity and androgeny exist in the interaction zone between poles, like Madonna and Prince. Boradkar thinks products exhibit this too, like the Cadillac Escalade—a car originally designed for an upscale Wasp market, appropriated by another urban ethnic culture, and then deliberately designed in successive models with this new market in mind. The hybrid result is something a conventional design process would never have envisioned.

Balkanization isn't a concern for Boradkar. “New technological gadgets won't allow balkanization. A student from China has the same iPod playlists as a local Arizona student.”

He is concerned about the silencing of voices. “It's not just one voice for all, as in the Bauhaus. There can never be one grand

narrative. It is a false premise. There is no unified theory that can explain multiplicities. The attempt to do that ignores the real for the ideal." In fact, Boradkar contends, "there is room for both paradigms to exist simultaneously—both the homogenous and the heterogenous."

What does this mean when a designer sits down to envision a solution to a design problem? Design is a cultural language itself, creating culture and participating in cultural evolution, either deliberately or inadvertently. Each graphic design piece has a voice, and its graphic designer must choose a language in which to speak. Surely audience-centered design diversity is only sensible—when the audience speaks and reads German, the message should be in German. If the audience can't read, the message should use images. And so on.

This is just basic functionalism. But audience-specific design languages do seem to be at odds with the closed system of modernist ideals. Many designers are troubled by what they see as an anti-modernist, anti-universalist multicultural design ethic. Even as the modernist hope for universal communication continues, post-colonial studies offer some vivid examples of the effects of the hegemonic "improvements" of one cultural paradigm over another. These "better" ways—like my Helvetica cleaning up the world—are imposed by the dominant culture on less powerful cultures without much dialogue or interaction. While design's professional expertise and method provides great benefits, we must come to terms with the imposition of foreign expressions on our audiences.

RAFAEL FAJARDO, design professor at the University of Denver, says that a universal linguistic and visual expression, no matter how altruistic its aims, "is optimistic in extreme, leveling and eliminating richness. The Spaniards leveled 2,000 language groups in Columbia. Each had its own poetry, now forever lost to the world. [Modernists] speak from the hegemony with the privilege

of determining the voice.” In fact, modernism is a distinctly northern European voice—not a natural universal language.

Fajardo points out the irony of Swahili represented in the Roman alphabet. Roman Catholic priests recorded oral language and gave it a shape. This imposed cultural norms inherent in the (semi-)systematic Roman alphabet and a vast underlying conceptual premise. He sees the Chinese historic example as pertinent, too: “Normally we don’t think of the printing press as a colonizer. But in China, they had their own printing tradition.”

Lorraine Wild feels that Pinyin, Mao Zedong’s massive project to phoneticize ideographic Chinese writing using the Roman alphabet, extends the conceptual disconnect still more. Pinyin’s standardized spelling was instituted in 1958 to streamline communications, but also to break oppressive traditions—a goal congruent with early 20th century Modernist political universalism. Ironically, today Pinyin is a major enabler of China’s aggressive entry into international capitalism and consumerism, the new global village.

SOME GRAPHIC DESIGN EDUCATORS, like Doug Kisor at the College for Creative Studies in Detroit, advocate the need for students to “get outside of their comfort zone” and cultural blinders. Fajardo says graphic design “should demand an ethical stance and understand otherness first hand. Student travel to nonwestern locations should be required, so they experience dislocation.” This could develop empathy for the dislocation that mismatched audiences routinely feel when encountering our slick professional graphic design messages. Graphic designers need a cultural fluency and a cosmopolitan attitude that will give them the agility to respond and adapt appropriately to each design problem’s cultural constituency. Yet this returns us to the question of balkanization and insularity.

Fajardo agrees with Boradkar that diversity is as necessary in

design as it is in biology. The biological world's organic evolutionary change and hybridity point to a model for design. Modernism's fixed monolithic ideal of one vision and voice for all audiences in all time does not accommodate cultural diversity and constant flux. Yet strict mimicry of cultural languages risks polarization. If professional designers can capture a heterogenous adaptive and responsive process, it promises to overcome both the limitations of homogenization and balkanization.

DESIGN PROCESS poses another challenge beyond the modernist/multiculturalist divide. Professional design is deliberate, proactive, and centered on the intentions of a few individuals—a collaboration of client, designer, and producer. Design is planned and systematic. Solutions tend to emerge fully formed and fabricated, all at once, as opposed to the reactive trial-and-error steps of biological evolution. The richness of indigenous cultures develops incrementally and spontaneously through many individual contributions across a wide field.

We need some new methods in our design toolkit, a sort of open architecture, to effectively incorporate cultural human factors that respond to diversity, multiplicity, and flux. Rather than a clean, fixed, “timeless” vision and form language, design needs an evolutionary and collaborative process to produce resonant expressions appropriate for each project's audience and moment in time. Then designers' own voices can contribute to the rich cultural cacophony rather than suppress it.

The other day I was behind a car with that “Celebrate Diversity” bumper sticker. It used to seem like a vaguely wimpy statement. But now I see that it's really a radical call for a new design vision.

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THE GRAND UNIFIED THEORY OF NOTHING

Randy Nakamura

Big Ideas and Design as Cultural Middlebrow.

IN THE 1960S AND 1970S, George Lois popularized the “big idea” in advertising. With his classic advertisements and covers for *Esquire*, he established concept over form. In his book *What's the Big Idea? How to Win with Outrageous Ideas That Sell*, Lois states:

“I look in vain for the big idea, for that one theme or slogan that says it all, that can be played back by the average consumer after one viewing. If you can't describe the big idea in one sentence or in three or four words, you don't have a big idea. Quick cuts and animation and computer graphics are techniques, and ephemeral techniques, at best. None of these devices is an idea... A great verbal idea can survive even terrible graphics.”¹

Lois's perfect combination of stripped down graphic wit, pop culture references, and clever copy made for memorable ads. Unfortunately, this legacy of concept over form has mutated over the decades into a new and strange form. Instead of merely applying “concept über alles” to actual pieces of design, designers want to engage their entire practice in this manner. This desire to turn design into a total conceptual discipline has its roots in the fact that both the cultural and social status of design have always been up for grabs. Being neither fine art nor vernacular art, but sampling, appropriating, and utilizing both domains, design occupies an area Pierre Bourdieu calls the “sphere of the legitimizable”: the zone between high and low culture that is constantly being contested, reconfigured, and challenged.² This is design as a middlebrow cultural practice. What is fascinating about contemporary design practice is the attempt by its practitioners to raise design above its middlebrow pedigree to a “higher realm,” away from the pejorative connotations of merely being “designer”

or “stylish.” Currently, this attempt at upward mobility often involves the appropriation of ideas from the sciences, specifically ecology and a relatively new branch of knowledge called systems theory (the idea that natural systems are “integrated wholes whose properties cannot be reduced to those of smaller parts”). Terry Irwin in her essay “A Crisis in Perception”³ outlines a manifesto for a type of “design ecology.” This is fundamentally a search for new metaphors. Unfortunately, these metaphors are strained and are deeply problematic in how they might be applied to design. At best, most of these ideas become comforting platitudes; at worst they are deeply confused and have a dubious value as any sort of corrective or improvement to the way design functions in the world.

Nature Over All.

THE IDEAS AND PHILOSOPHY of Fritjof Capra have deeply influenced Irwin. The title of her essay is a direct lift from the first chapter of Capra’s *The Web of Life*.⁴ Capra is best known for his book *The Tao of Physics*, a blend of eastern philosophy and quantum mechanics. *The Web of Life* is Capra’s attempt to synthesize various elements of deep ecology, evolution, molecular biology, chaos theory, systems theory, and eastern mysticism in order to show the interconnectedness of all things. What is most interesting about Capra is the deeply reductionist mindset he uses to juggle all of these disparate disciplines. Extremely controversial concepts like the possibility that evolution is “creative” and “directed” he takes as givens in order to promote his thesis about the “self-organization” of the universe. Everything he assesses and weighs leads back to his singular set of ideas. In a sense, this is a perfect reaction to postmodernism (a counter-reformation). Culture is entirely subsumed within the idea of nature since “deep ecology does not separate humans—or anything else—from the natural environment.” Problems that exist in culture are

explicitly ignored. Direct study of human cultural problems is irrelevant, since they occur within larger macroscopic patterns such as evolution, ecology, and self-organized systems.

One gets the sense that Capra's project is deeply modernist in philosophy. His obsession with totalizing systems and the singular directedness of nature would be more disturbing if it weren't for his eloquence and the benign nature he ascribes to the universe. He also has an unfortunate tendency to look like a dwarf standing on the shoulders of giants. The vast majority of the 347 pages of *The Web of Life*, is spent explaining other people's ideas and discoveries. Capra has precious little to add other than repeated catchphrases like "interconnectedness" and "conceptual dimension."

It is hard to see how Capra's theories could be useful for a design practice, seeing how he is philosophically prone to erasing culture rather than investigating it. Since culture really is the basic substance and lifeblood of design, it seems perverse to try to use him as an aid to improve design practice. Nevertheless Irwin attempts the impossible.

The first part of "A Crisis in Perception" establishes Capra's basic principles. In Irwin's view, "nature is a better designer than we are" and she proceeds to paraphrase one of Capra's arguments:

"Living systems theory tells us that life's natural tendency is to organize into ever greater levels of complexity—in networks, patterns and structures that emerge out of seeming chaos without external imposition or direction. Organization wants to happen. Imagine that—the world isn't waiting for designers to impose order upon it. Perhaps many designers weren't laboring under such delusions of grandeur, but I now realize that I was."

The conflation of ideas here is amazing. Apparently "life" is meant to stand for the entirety of human evolution, history, cul-

ture, and social development. Although it is tantalizing to mistake metaphor for reality, in the end it is a mistake. The self-organization of living systems takes place on a time scale of billions of years. The fact that a human designer has the technological and cultural know-how to design and produce a complex artifact like a book in a matter of a few weeks (or even days) is evidence of an amazing efficiency that no “natural system” has ever equaled. The world is in fact waiting to be designed, if only because human beings by necessity have to scale time to their own needs. Maybe nature will sculpt a windbreak for your campsite in few thousand years, but how much smarter and more efficient to make your own out of a few tree branches and a tarp. There are no delusions of grandeur here; only the necessity of keeping yourself warm.

Irwin also indulges in quite a bit of teleological confusion: either you accept Capra’s hypothesis (borrowed from deep ecology) that everything in the world is “nature” and there can be no “external imposition or direction” or you come back to reality, take Ecology 101, and realize that all natural systems have dynamic (and extraordinarily complex) interrelationships with other natural (or human-made) systems, and that most of the vaunted self-organizational capacities of these systems occur because of these external relationships, and not from any kind of spooky sounding quality like a “natural tendency.” Tautology is no substitute for knowing what the hell you are talking about.

Designing Without Design.

ULTIMATELY, IN THE REALM OF DESIGN, ideas have to be useful. They must have some sort of impact on the process, form, or conception of design. Even George Lois with his legendary disdain of form had to find a photographer sympathetic to his ideas, or the classic *Esquire* covers of Muhammad Ali and Richard Nixon would never have existed except in Lois’s head. In the last half

of “A Crisis in Perception,” Irwin speculates on how Capra’s ideas might be implemented within a design practice. Irwin’s start is inauspicious. She states:

“Remember that design is first and foremost a process of analysis and problem-solving and isn’t always tied to the making of artifacts. Try to better understand how the world works.”

Suddenly design isn’t really about design any more. Craft and form are depreciated in the face of “analysis” and “understanding.” This appears to be a halfhearted attempt to re-cast design as a primarily quantitative and analytical discipline. Yes, design is about analysis and problem-solving, but its fundamental impact on the world (for better or worse) is in the artifacts and form it produces. This is the only way ideas survive in design. To denigrate form and artifact making in design is to destroy its essence and reduce it to a generic role of think tank or consultant. Irwin’s continued use of jargon like “waste/energy flows,” “interdependencies,” and “ecosystem” only seems to emphasize her tendency towards trying to elevate design using a quantitative, pseudo-scientific language.

After depriving design of its distinctive ways of dealing with the world, Irwin goes one step further into a realm that is almost messianic:

“I don’t think it will be the politicians or the economists or the businessmen who will solve the problems of pollution, loss of biodiversity and indigenous cultures, poverty or war and violence. The design of a new reality may be called for, which doesn’t mean creating a ‘fix’ for our current structure. As Fritjof Capra said in a lecture at JFK University last fall, ‘The Stone Age didn’t end because they suddenly ran out of stones... someone designed something better.’ If a new design is needed,

who is better equipped to deliver it than a new generation of designers? The first step is to develop a vision that says design can make a divergence—perhaps the biggest difference.”

Ignoring the weird elision here of design and engineering—was the origin of metallurgy really a moment of design history? Capra’s supposed revelation raises more questions than it could possibly answer—the precedent here is thin, probably non-existent. Design has never ended or “solved” war, poverty, or violence. Early 20th century movements like de Stijl and Russian Constructivism attempted to connect design to larger political, social, and spiritual ideologies. In the case of Constructivism, Alexander Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova explicitly connected design to “scientific communism.” They adopted a rigorous pseudoscientific language and evolved efficient means of propaganda and self-promotion. In the end they were smashed flat by the same ideology they attempted to promulgate. Despite its disastrous conclusion, Constructivism still generated a meaningful legacy because of the designed form and ideas it left behind.

Deprived of form, Irwin has walked design into a dead end. You cannot be influential by appropriating the conceptual corpses of someone else’s ideas. The design artifacts you leave behind will be your ultimate legacy.

If design as a discipline of pure ideas is comical, then design as messiah is tragic. Irwin diminishes design’s real importance while smearing it with a fake veneer of political and social importance. It is one more design theory destined for the dustbin of history.

The Crisis of Ignorance.

IF IRWIN HAS A SALIENT POINT in her essay, it is the observation that there is a crisis in design’s relationship with science and technology. Design’s increasing immersion in and dependence on digital technology is unquestionable. The effects of this trans-

formation are far-reaching and unpredictable. Designers accurately reflect society in that they are as ignorant about science as everybody else. The ramifications of this ignorance are vast, affecting our entire society from the educational system (declining enrollments in science and technical disciplines), to government (where politics and big business take precedence over sound scientific research) and even employment (if employers cannot find qualified engineers and scientists domestically, they will inevitably look overseas for the cheaper alternative).

While Rome burns, designers are obsessed with big ideas cribbed from scientific disciplines they can barely understand. The only apparent rationale behind these misguided obsessions is an attempt to drag design from its middlebrow status into a higher arena, or in Pierre Bourdieu's words the "sphere of the legitimate with universal claims"; i.e., the realm of fine arts, poetry, and literature. If it always seems like design will be the bastard child of the art school, then a blind trek through the domain of science is at least an original, if failed attempt, to raise design's status.

Status can never be attained through fake knowledge. If design is in a rut, it can only lift itself out by its own means, not by dreaming of a *deus ex machina* from systems theory. If design wants to engage with science, it can do so on a multitude of fronts, but it must do so on a plane where science and design can connect as equals, not from a point of veneration and misty-eyed misunderstanding. If the fields of systems theory and self-organized systems are so important, then the challenge for design is to find a way to visualize these exceedingly abstract, relational, macroscopic processes in a form that is understandable to a layperson. This is an extremely tall order that perhaps lacks the glamour of "big ideas," but it is absolutely essential to a real design practice that knows one of its most powerful tools is to affect and change perception.

What is perhaps the most disappointing part about Irwin's



Graphic design as it is currently defined has too many moving parts: commercial, academic, professional, service-oriented, artistic, experimental. If design criticism has a role to play, it may be in teasing these things apart, in trimming some of the fat, and challenging assumptions like the idea that design has a social function.

— DMITRI SIEGEL

An interview with

DMITRI SIEGEL

RUDY VANDERLANS: My decision to interview you is based on two articles of yours that I've read. One is an essay for *DotDotDot* #6 on Tibor Kalman, the other is a review about *Emigre* #64, RANT, in *Adbusters*.^{*} I think they're both very insightful articles, and they read like you have a personal stake in the issues at hand. If I had to guess, I'd say that you initiated these essays. There seems to be a real passion about them, as if you had been thinking about these issues for a while. Can you briefly tell me how these two articles came about, and how you got them published?

DMITRI SIEGEL: Thank you very much for the compliment. My writing has grown primarily out of publishing a small art magazine called *Ante*, which I started as a collaboration with a sculptor named Nicholas Herman. In each issue I felt like graphic design was underrepresented, so I would write something myself. For the first issue I wrote an article called "Fuck Tibor." I thought that explaining my love/hate relationship with one of my heroes would be a good way of introducing some of the current issues in graphic design to a general audience. That article formed the nucleus of the "Fuck Heroes (I Believe in Heroes)" piece in *DotDotDot*. Kalle Lasn read "Fuck Heroes" and asked me if I would write something for *Adbusters*. At the time, RANT had just come out and I had just published the second issue of *Ante*, for which I had written an article called "Going Dutch" about the Dutch system of grants and government stipends. RANT connected with that and a lot of other things that I was thinking about at the time. Kalle was kind enough to publish it even though I don't think it was what he was expecting at all.

RUDY: You have just graduated from Yale. Can you give some insight on whether Yale helped you with your desire to write about design? Is that something that is encouraged, discussed, critiqued at Yale?

^{*} The article can be read at http://www.typotheque.com/articles/rant_reviewed.html

DMITRI: Not at all. Every graduate student writes a thesis statement about their own work and an eight-minute presentation about the work that has influenced them, but critical writing is not part of the program. The faculty demands (I think rightly) that students focus on their own work and their own voice. My interest in writing was really outside of my graphic design training.

RUDY: How have you developed this ability to write critically about graphic design? Have there been certain milestones that inspired you to move in this direction?

DMITRI: I don't think I have a great ability to write, but I would say one important thing is that my first attempts to write about design have been for a general audience. The first piece I wrote was in the summer of 2002 about the release of the typeface Gotham, and it was for a publication that had nothing to do with graphic design. That forced me to speak plainly. I realized while writing that piece how uninteresting most of the "inside baseball" stuff about graphic design really is. This has continued with *Ante*, whose audience is artists. Artists tend to be suspicious of graphic design, so I can't take their interest for granted. In general I try to write about things that I would be able to explain to my Grandma (who still thinks I went to grad school for typing). That's not dumbing down the content or being simplistic—it's just a different set of criteria for making decisions while writing and editing. The review of *Rant* was obviously an exception to that. I think I wrote that just for other designers (maybe even just other design writers), and in some ways I think it is a weaker piece of writing because of that.

RUDY: What are your hopes after graduation? Is design writing a viable choice? Is this something you see as a professional opportunity, something you may do full-time? Or is writing about design simply an extension of your interest in doing graphic design?

DMITRI: I hope I can continue to write. I wonder how long the current interest in design writing will last. All this image-free graphic design discourse on blogs and magazines demonstrates that the field is becoming more academic. Perhaps it has to do with the ballooning number of designers with MFAs, but it seems clear that the profile of the average graphic designer is changing a bit.

RUDY: How does theory and writing about design inform your design work, if it does at all?

DMITRI: I am no expert on theory, but I do find it inspiring, particularly the way theorists manage to own certain terms. They write an entire essay or book defining a word like “swerve” (Bloom) or “empire” (Negri) or “spectacle” (DeBord), and then that way of using the term is forever associated with them. It’s highbrow slang as far as I’m concerned. I appreciate it in much the same way that I appreciate how Snoop Dogg gets away with saying “bitch” on national television simply by mispronouncing it. That inspires me as a designer and a writer because I would love it if my work—my way of saying—became part of the culture (rather than a comment on culture). But I’m pretty sure that doesn’t happen by trying to make graphic design out of theory. Criticism is about design, not the other way around. Turning theory into graphic design sounds like something out of a fairy tale. Theory as it relates to writing about design is another story. I hear too many people whining, as if theory is somehow oppressing them, or preventing them from understanding someone’s writing. Of course there are writers who use theory in that way—citing things or name-dropping as if it were an exercise of power, but that kind of writing tends to defeat itself by being boring. Theory creates a useful shorthand for complicated ideas. It could take paragraphs to describe the tension between reality and representation, but a term like “simulacra” contains all of that complexity and texture. People say, “Oh, that’s just a way of shutting out

those who aren't in the know." But that's not the way language works. You don't need to have read DeBord to understand what "the spectacle" is because language itself understands. The meaning is built into the context and usage of the word. It may take repeated exposure, but you will get that meaning regardless of whether or not you read footnotes.

RUDY: Recently there was a lengthy discussion on *Speak Up* about design writing. Some of the comments, and we've heard this before, say that if you criticize graphic design you'd better back up your words with a portfolio of work of your own. What are your criteria for judging a piece of design criticism?

DMITRI: I am all for bad-mouthing critics but you should bad-mouth their writing, not their gardening or their hair or their graphic design. Can you imagine how utterly pointless it would be to discuss Clement Greenberg's paintings? Or Rosalind Krauss's sculpture? The fact is, we probably need more people who just write about graphic design, not more people (like me) who "also write." The writing that interests me resonates in some way with my experience, not my desire to be on the cutting edge. The desire for novelty is a form of insecurity, and writing that panders to the reader's insecurities is not only light; it is insidious. Not to mention that the fact that something is new has absolutely no bearing on whether it is any good. Beyond that, my criteria are pretty straightforward. A good critique has to be eager for and equal to my disagreement. This requires that the author be generous and thorough in her presentation. I don't usually get angry over sloppy writing or fluff—I just move on and forget about it—so if something gets me angry, there is probably something useful in it. Good criticism promotes argument rather than shutting it down.

RUDY: In your critique of *Emigre* #64 in *Adbusters*, you mentioned that the authors were still mired in the old arguments over style.

You argued that, particularly in regard to projects like *DotDotDot*, such criticism is no longer valid, that “work that attempts to recontextualize graphic design deserves to be critiqued in those terms.” The first question that comes to my mind is what would a fair critique of *DotDotDot* focus on?

DMITRI: A fair critique of *DotDotDot* would focus on the content—the critic should ask, “What is being written about?” “How?” and “What does any of this have to do with graphic design?” Answering those questions would be a lot more interesting than examining the form or style of the magazine.

RUDY: Why dismiss talking about the formal issues of design? Have the forms and styles that designers spent lifetimes developing suddenly become meaningless?

DMITRI: The article was about design writing, not design. I dismissed writing about formal issues because I don’t think writing about form and style in graphic design is terribly meaningful right now. That’s not to say it hasn’t been or won’t be, but it just doesn’t seem like a very timely critique. I also hoped it would make someone angry.

RUDY: In the same article you focus on design in Holland, where you have noted a significant move from design-as-problem-solving to design as an open intellectual pursuit where designers create their own contexts “in which they can do work that is satisfying and new.” I can imagine that such a position may come across as sounding very self-indulgent to some. So how do you go from attaining that position of autonomy to creating something worthwhile for all?

DMITRI: The word “new” sounds ridiculous in that sentence, doesn’t it? Anyway, I’m curious why it’s important to create something “worthwhile for all.” Why is social responsibility so often presented as the solution to graphic design’s existential predicament

(that is, the fear that in the end it's all just advertising)? What's wrong with being self-indulgent? It may be annoying to others, but if you are autonomous you don't really have to worry about that, do you? Graphic design as it is currently defined has too many moving parts: commercial, academic, professional, service-oriented, artistic, experimental. If design criticism has a role to play, it may be in teasing these things apart, in trimming some of the fat, and challenging assumptions like the idea that design has a social function. Over the years, designer/writers have done a lot of hand-wringing about the future of graphic design and its relevance. It strikes me that art critics never worry about the future of art. They gleefully declare the death of painting. They even do it every couple of years. Maybe those of us who are writing about design are too involved to really think critically about it.

RUDY: Also, regarding the “autonomous spirit” in Dutch design, since this work is often accomplished with the help of government subsidies, grants, and stipends, one can hardly call it autonomous. A subsidized autonomy seems a bit oxymoronic. Is there a danger that this kind of work will simply exist because of subsidies, making it difficult to determine its real value to society?

DMITRI: Recently two friends of mine were arguing about the relative merits of living in New York City. One was explaining what he hates about New York, and the other was describing what she loves about it. After getting very worked up, the guy blurted, “There are just so many pretentious people in New York!” To which my female friend responded, “Exactly.” “Real value to society” is difficult to determine under any circumstances. The harder question is whether a society is worth contributing to in the first place. I could live with subsidized autonomy. It's the kind of societal ill I could take pride in.

RUDY: Finally, you ended your *Adbusters* article with the following:

“A dialogue based on the presupposition that design is not only an open creative process but a conversation with the world beyond design may help move our profession in unexpected and reckless directions—a sure sign of growth.” This sounds rather abstract to me. What would such a conversation be about and who exactly are we having this conversation with?

DMITRI: That sentence is abstract and vague and probably the result of thinking too hard about graphic design. One of the reasons I want to keep writing is that each piece of writing is an opportunity to make up for the last one. In any case, my central point in the article is that one thing that distinguishes graphic design from the other visual arts is its variable context. Art objects exist in the vacuum of the white cube—intellectually if not physically—and they have to be meaningful in and of themselves. But graphic design exists in the marketplace. It has adapted and mutated, creating hundreds of different contexts for production and exhibition. As I mentioned earlier, this is problematic, but in my opinion that is the most interesting problem for a design critic to address right now. Design writers should exploit the fact that they are free to write about context—politics, music, biography, science, etc. Art criticism that dwells on these things is lazy, but design writing is, thankfully, a broader enterprise. If we stick to discussing graphic design “in its native habitat,” we will not only distinguish our scholarship but we will end up talking about what is current in our culture—not just in graphic design but in art, photography, academia, everywhere.

I should mention (as I did in the review) that I am merely advocating this type of critique, not inventing it. People have been doing this type of writing for a long time and you have published much of it. But the question of how criticism relates to design practice has to be constantly re-answered. The publication of *RANT* was a great opportunity for a lot of people (myself includ-

ed) to take a stab at it. Writing the review helped me to realize that I don't actually care that much about criticism, but I care deeply about how criticism relates to practice. Is the point to parse out style distinctions or is it to define the medium? If the answer is the latter (which I believe), then design critics should search constantly for the far edge of design, not the near edge.



When design attempts to disconnect itself from lay criticism, it contradicts some of its core declarations of import. Design vaunts itself as an accessible art. It doesn't require burdensome theory. Design is the public art—everybody gets it. Unless, of course, issue is taken with the designer's claim. Then, you obviously *don't* get it.

— KENNETH FITZGERALD

BUZZ KILL

Kenneth FitzGerald

“...Business wants him (the designer) to help create an attitude about the facts, not to communicate them. And only about some of the facts.”

—William Golden

“Design is an attitude.”

—from *Breaking Rules*, 1987 Adobe Systems typography poster.

Life in the Hive.

BILL GOLDEN NAILED IT DECADES AGO. Design is about attitude, having it and giving it. Despite its long-standing semi-scientific conceits, graphic design is pure culture. No one possesses an instrument to quantify good design. We might describe with a degree of certainty how design will function in specific situations. But it's another thing altogether to proclaim that that function is a physical rule of nature.

By incorporating theories such as the *gestalt*, design has long attempted to do just that. But in retrospect, the idea of *gestalt* fits comfortably into the tenor, the attitude of the times. It may not be objective but it gives that *sense*.

'Tude is fixed in the social lexicon, and culture's attitude of choice is cool. As described in the 2001 PBS documentary *The Merchants of Cool*, the search for cool drives culture relentlessly. Design, a creature of culture, is right there in the mix. The manifestations of cool morph as we move across subcultures (the documentary focuses on marketing to teenagers, but every demographic has its cool), but there are constants. A fundamental is the aspect of being plugged into the *zeitgeist*. The designer claims to be able to read, then write, to culture. It's the designer as cool hunter, gatherer, and chef.

Designers must be simultaneously—or cyclically—intuitive (divining cool out of culture) and intellectual (conceptualizing

cool into culture). This requirement puts a lot of pressure on designers. They're deranged by the attempt to satisfy the objective imperative of the business world while wrangling with the inflexible. (The grandiose and near-mystical promises of branding experts may rate highest on the psychosis scale.)

THE SOUNDTRACK OF COOL IS BUZZ. Buzz is as it sounds: an undifferentiated, massed chorus of voices in constant locution. It's the audio of Brownian motion. Buzz imparts a sense of activity, of words being passed. However, those words are indistinct. There's just an impression of repetition, of the same resonance issuing forth from all quarters. If you can pick a discrete voice from the mass, it's merely echoing the group.

Buzz is often an end in itself. The perception of substance becomes the reality. If everybody's talking about something, it must be worth talking about. Buzz is a self-perpetuating wavefront, constantly circulating in culture's fishbowl. Design is an exercise in generating buzz. In this, it's similar to any culture-related field, from popular music to politics. Within design, buzz plays a greater role in style-related work. It's all attitudes in fashion and pop music.

In the near absence of any regular critical review, buzz is the means by which design establishes value. Buzz makes taste. Ambitious designers recognize how the field operates and they shrewdly modulate the hum. If you want to have a career, you need to create your own buzz. Just get people talking. The goal is to synthesize a reality of your own importance. This makes a majority of designers temporary, but fervent, postmodernists. The collapse of verities is a positive boon to crafting your own identity.

All that's needed is that first murmur. Aiding the process is the industry of commercialized celebrity. Design publications need to fill pages with superlative designers. A constant supply of new

models must be rolled out and established brands extended. Once Designer X is featured in *Communication Arts* or *Print*, the din begins. In parallel is the plethora of design competitions—often sponsored by the media or vendors seeking their own buzz. Associated with competitions are conferences and workshops, similarly sponsored by magazines and vendors. We then have AIGA chapters with their need to present guest star lecturers. Often, they look to each other, the big groups landing the big fish.

There's nothing necessarily mendacious about this. However, it goes to illustrate the tight loop of renown that's ideal for inventing buzz. The process becomes the justification. The inflated encomiums penned for the laudatory essays, lecture fliers, and workshop prospectuses become Truth. Eventually, everybody *knows* that Designer X bleeds graphic design.

While I have begun with magazines, the buzz could just as likely start with an AIGA chapter or a competition. It's the cool feedback loop: do the media make buzz or pick up on it? It's both—the reality of buzz is that it's often tough, if not impossible, to locate its source. Buzz provides its own background noise.

Despite its conceit of strategic production, design continues to indulge in and seek to perpetuate the reign of buzz. The rise of design blogs has unfortunately served only to amplify buzz, in the sense that discourse resonates more noisily with received wisdom and specious claims.

IF WE REGARD DESIGN ACTIVITY as buzz generation—and individual designers' need to be buzzed about—we can explain much of the field's continuing aversion to critical writing. Criticism is the big buzz kill, the weigh station on the infotainment superhighway.

The agitation instigated by last year's *Emigre* #64, RANT, (and the two subsequent issues) has, obviously, been telling. As most essays have been a deliberate instigation, choleric retorts are to be

expected. But what has been most noticeable is the pointed refusal of respondents to engage the substantive points of any critical argument. True, there's little real substantial discussion going on anywhere about anything. But design is particularly mired in a stylish pretense.

This is a necessity of buzz maintenance: to deflect any exploration beyond the superficial. Go into details, start a conversation, and people may stop buzzing to actually listen. If you can't refute the message, disclaim the messenger's credentials. Denying the critic's legitimacy dispenses with the necessity of actually arguing merits. Secondly, designers dispute the relevance of the critical process the critic supposedly employs. Very often, respondents bounce back and forth between the two, making up objections as they go along.

The most popular critical dodges are easy to catalog. What follows is the fantastic four of critical avoidance. Each is guaranteed to be regularly used by designers of all ages and standing within the field.

The Lay Nay (Practice Spake Perfect).

If you're not a practitioner, says the designer, you have no standing to criticize me. Design's obsession over credentials is emblematic of a discipline in its infancy. The field seems quaint, clinging to a creed that its activity is inviolable to outsiders. The notion that only working professionals are qualified to offer criticism should be met with incredulity. ("I'm sorry, Miss Sontag; unless you can show me you can take pictures, your essays in *On Photography* have no relevance. Maybe you should work some weddings to give you insight.")

A lesson design should take from architecture is an acceptance of autonomous critical review. Admittedly, it wasn't an effortless transition there, either. In his book, *Lewis Mumford & American Modernism*, Robert Wojtowicz quotes an architect's lengthy screed

from 1931 against the eminent critic. The architect protested Mumford's rebukes with a jibe against his lack of training. Mumford's response still resonates today: "I am not at all won over to [the] notion that the fact that I cannot design a building disables me from passing on the results. I am not able to lay an egg, either, but I can tell by testing it whether it is good or bad."

When design attempts to disconnect itself from lay criticism, it contradicts some of its core declarations of import. Design vaunts itself as an accessible art. It doesn't require burdensome theory. Design is the public art—everybody gets it. Unless, of course, issue is taken with the designer's claim. Then, you obviously *don't* get it. The client a designer dreams of isn't a knowledgeable one; it's acquiescent. Shutting out non-practitioners will squelch any worthwhile external appreciation for design practice. Are designers disingenuous with their pleas to be taken seriously?

Designers infrequently declare that the particular arcana of their practice cannot be apprehended by the uninitiated. The most forthright will propose it's the ability to empathize, articulate nebulous concepts, meet deadlines, and respect economic and technological realities. All of these skills should be part of a capable design practice. But none is its sole property. Nor is it alone in requiring such a range of talents. A related occupation that calls upon those supposed design-specific abilities is *writing* about design.

For argument's sake, let's accept that a critic must also be a practitioner. The next question must be, how *much* of a practitioner? What amount of design experience is adequate? Answering this question brings us headlong into another long-running dispute, over "untrained" designers. We must also squabble over the collaborative nature of design and who gets credit. (Are art directors designers? Production people?) If design can't come up with a test to certify design practitioners, what luck will it have licensing critics?

The preferred criticism is by practitioners or journalists firmly embedded in the field's journals of record. Affirmation, not contention, is the prized perspective. Boats aren't rocked; names aren't named—except to extol. So far, simply writing more than one article about design qualifies the commentator as a “critic.” That seems refreshingly egalitarian. Until you notice the 500-point asterisk excluding non-professionals. The laity are unwelcome competition for pros aiming to tack “critic” onto their resume. The designation can provide some serious buzz. As long as you are not stupid enough to actually *criticize* another designer.

Middle Age Dread.

Citing the age of the critic seems obligatory for a younger respondent. “A bunch of depressingly middle-aged complaints” or “middle-aged whining” has been written so often that the phrase must be programmed as a function key. This knee-jerk dismissal is an objective-seeming score. If you're over 40, you're over 40.

The substantive failing of such generalization should be obvious. Rather than a middle-aged mindset—the habits of which are never described; they are obviously self-evident—what is exposed is an insecurity about one's own position.

A related misconception is to extrapolate nostalgia from a contemporary critique. If a middle-ager points out a concern about current activity it's interpreted as automatically prizing the “good old days.” Absent a specific comparison, such a claim exists only in the minds of the reader. If any group is currently sentimental for times past, it is the younger generation. In a May discussion on the Speak Up blog entitled “The Olympians” (“I thought it would be fun to engage in some unapologetic hero-worship”) the overwhelming majority of design gods chosen by the youngsters were safely into their middle age. So much for failing to respect your elders.

A younger design sensibility in opposition to the old has also been proclaimed. But it remains as undefined as the one attributed to the middle-aged. If every generation thinks it invented sex, every new design generation believes it has contrived practical, theory-free, service-oriented design. “The changes in the graphic design movement” that *Emigre* writers are unable to accept, according to James Waite (*Emigre* #66, THE READERS RESPOND), is the rote doctrine of mainstream design.

Only through ignorance of any time but the present could Waite’s “manifesto” be regarded as anything but banal. (But his insight on Picasso being a shrewd exploiter of trends, rather than a transcendent genius, is first-rate.)

Waite is correct that critical writing has little relevance for him—or most designers. A joy of culture is in its not being a monolithic experience. And when I sit down with the contractor to discuss my bathroom renovation, I may find it engaging but extraneous for him to cite Lewis Mumford (I may also fear what her estimate will be.) However, if it is to have any relevance to the oft-cited “real world,” design must engage the wider culture. And—who knows?—regarding it as such may, in even the humblest cases, inspire a designer to “transform my work and make it better.”

The more substantive new writers have made a welcome call for a closer examination of the uses of design. However, this has been mistakenly framed as opposition to a middle-aged fixation with “form and style.” Critiquing the meanings attributed to form—and how designers deploy form—hardly constitutes legislating an approved formal vocabulary. And countering this perceived extreme by declaring such critiques irrelevant is no improvement.

Meanwhile, other writers are employing the agenda of moving beyond “form and style” to reaffirm the professional determina-

from reality. If anything, it's too real. Like real world design, academia is a compromised activity where all the tensions within society are played out. Students, fellow faculty, and school administrators are all very real people with differing agendas. All have a direct impact upon the academic product—as do design professionals. Deadlines and financial pressures abound.

Try constructing a curriculum under the typical academic budget and the curious mix of faculty skills and sensibilities to be found in the typical art department. *Then* tell me how academia is a compromise-free zone of real world disengagement. Like design, art academia is a brawling farrago of idealism, aesthetics, financial imperatives, technological wrangling, and cutthroat politicking. A designer who thinks client meetings are tough hasn't set foot in the typical faculty meeting.

If designers feel it's valid to reject criticism from “unpractical” educators, they should recuse themselves from critiquing academics based upon their lecture, workshop, or night class gigs. Or is academia's role solely to invite buzzed designers on campus to trumpet their achievements?

It's not that academics don't get it; they understand only too well. Design professors continue to be drawn almost exclusively from the mainstream design world. As a studio art, professors must demonstrate design products for credit towards their research. (Writing is considered the province of the art historians. A critical writer on design in academia is as odd a beast as in the field.)

There's plenty to rail at in how design is represented and taught in universities. But few designers have the insight, interest, or stamina to engage the day-to-day reality. However, perceptively analyzing academia is never the intent. Scoring cheap buzz points with the drones is. Instead of initiating pissing contests over who's “real,” designers might recognize the “them” is *us*.

On the whole, designers seem to have suffered a collective trauma from their experiences in art departments and schools. This

was given excruciating voicing in Chip Kidd's novel *The Cheese Monkeys*. Drilled by their merciless profs; mocked by their *artiste* peers. Now, it's payback time! At some point, designers need to just *get over it*.

The Conjecture Rejection.

The most damning term in the anti-critical arsenal is "theory." Any proposal by academics—due to their disengagement with the real world—is considered "theoretical." In this usage, it's a synonym for "fantasy." Buzz-wording an argument as "theoretical" is the designer's magic wand. Wave it, and pesky, unanswerable criticism disappears! In his seven-paragraph *Eye* review, Adrian Shaughnessy uses the term "theoretical" thrice and (in case you missed it) concludes with "theorist." No other term in the review is so used. Or abused.

From its persistent invoking, the RANT writers must have been proposing the wildest design ideas ever. Were they 50-foot tall annual reports? Anti-gravity inks? Synesthesia-inducing layouts? Boustrephedon text all around? Unfortunately, Shaughnessy offers no specifics.

How or to *what degree* a commentary is "theoretical" never gets explained. Theory is, simply, a speculation on what might be. Every art director's instruction to a junior, every firm's capability statement, every competition juror's decision, is by definition theoretical. Each involves a qualitative choice based upon conjecture on what *may* be better. Criticism is a deliberative process that compares what *was* done with what *might have* been done.

To label criticism "theoretical" asserts nothing more profound than pointing out it is comprised of words. There can also be no "theory-free" design, a logical impossibility. All work is guided by some debatable assumptions. Only in the sphere of cliché or derivation can we have any assurance that a given design will function as supposed.

That criticism is theoretical by nature is not at issue. What is arguable is the specificity and suitability of the critique. To determine this, details are of vital relevance. But it's these fine points that are routinely omitted when designers protest the theoretical nature of a criticism. The fine points aren't enumerated because there aren't any. Attaching the "theory" tag is the total intended response. Simply slap the label on and the "practical" design narrative does the rest.

Parading the straw man of "sharp-brained theorist" in front of a design audience is like bellowing "liberal" before Republicans. The stench of French literary theory is wafted over all criticism, even if the *j'accused* critic couldn't name a Derrida text on a bet. (Unfortunately, a segment of designers have abetted this parody by insistently equating such writing with theory. All knowledge should be our province but it's time to see more of the world.)

We must turn to conjecture to determine the type of speculation that designers consider bizarre and untenable. Clues may be found in Shaughnessy's review when he defers blame for all the concerns cited in RANT to "the boardrooms of the corporations and into the dark heart of the mass media." Accountability, he insists, cannot be placed upon designers (except for those "arty practitioners" championed by academics) but resides with "brand managers."

Proper criticism, therefore, gives designers a free pass for any of the consequences of their work. Further, they may disclaim any requirement to stand by *their* theory about their work. Once again, designers get to have it both ways. You can write grandiloquent capability brochures touting your powers. But when you're taken to task for the puffery, plead impotence.

A "theoretical" criticism is evidently one that takes a designer to task for *anything*. Except, of course, the kind of practical stuff designers really love to talk about... like kerning.

When a designer says “practical,” what is meant is “absolutional.” Value in design is set using the most cynical measure. The client bought it; it must be good. If I sold it, everything I say about it is true. Buzz is all. Now, that’s a theory worthy of impracticality.

Hum Bugged.

AND WHAT OF “CRITICAL BUZZ”? Arguably, some designers’ careers were made when their work was featured in *Emigre*, *Eye*, and books like *The Graphic Edge*. All the more reason for enunciation and explication. Fight fire with fire. In any critical literature, dissent can be found. Rather than instilling conformity, an honest, detailed criticism promotes diversity of opinion. It’s democracy in action. It’s clearing a space amidst the humdrum for *your* voice.

But the spectacle of otherwise-bright practitioners attempting to parse whether or not some writer is a designer, instead of answering the charges...that I can do without. And so can the field. Don’t buzz: learn the words.

Kenneth FitzGerald is an Assistant Professor of Art at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia.

I believe that there exists in graphic design an underlying philanthropy that is routinely denied in the classroom.

This denial is the result of a field that no longer leads but answers to the market. It is a nod to the “real world” and it coincides with the dumbing down of design education and the bucking of creative process.

— ANTHONY INCIONG

TUNING UP

Anthony Inciong

PRACTICALITY is the quality employers seek in young designers these days. Kenneth FitzGerald affirms this by stating “Academia promotes design education the way the field likes—as practical.”¹ As an educator, I remain suspicious of this. It’s the market talking, that purported universal determiner of the rules by which Academia must play. “Practical” (read: “production”) is a way of ensuring that educators and the design programs of which they are a part heed and feed the market’s voracious appetite for “fresh new talent.” There is such an emphasis on practicality that we fail to acknowledge an irony: practicality today is glaringly dissonant from the goal of Academia because, for design, it often excludes theory, history, and research in favor of technique. Ironically, educators are and have been willing accomplices to this disturbingly anti-humanistic streak.

Obviously, graphic design education cannot and should not be a world unto itself, nor should it ignore what the field values. What fascinates me is the ongoing tendency to divorce the practice of graphic design from the humanistic forays that lend it significance. Sadly, the intellectually deprived landscape of the classroom today is not a result of disinterest but of outright market acquiescence that leads to fear. For Academia, fear amounts to the feeling that it can’t be too experimental or theoretical because what design offices *really* want is someone who knows Photoshop and knows how to get “things” to a printer. Students have to be employable, because if they aren’t, enrollment will go down, budgets will be reduced, and the technological support needed to offer more competitive courses will be diminished and... While these are certainly valid concerns, Academia may be neglecting larger issues pertaining to how designers must think when they make objects, how the objects they make are distributed and consumed, and how those objects function in culture—all for the sake of the market.

But what are theory, history, and research? How are these per-

herent to the practical and more palpable aspects of graphic design? How do we teach these and why should we even care? Theory, as I see it, is educated speculation informed by personal experience, the knowledge one has gained through study, and an awareness of what is deemed acceptable in practice. Theory can lead to novel and highly effective solutions.² (A patently familiar form of speculation for designers is the act of composing pages to always anticipate a reader's response.) Synthesizing information gained from research and history leads to knowledge that, when applied to a work, can heighten its potency. The investigative nature of research qualifies it as history—uncovering information that already exists—and in that sense I see the two as being similar.

These modes of analysis are by no means unfathomable. I imagine that the historian, scientist, novelist, programmer, and engineer employ these as a means of reflecting upon their work. Why don't we? Perhaps the perceived abstractness of research and history stems from their seeming disconnectedness to visual art. (Don't ask. *Make!*) Do we believe so much in the primacy of creativity that we are willing to *make* at the expense of accumulated knowledge that exists at its periphery? As we continue to fall headlong into the market's velvet embrace, we leave behind values and concerns that make our work a force for positive change. This is an enormous price to pay for the steady stream of comforts granted us by a market pleased to know we are on its side. The notion that one can work without edifying one's self is an unforgivable conceit. To operate so insularly prompts me to ask: to whom are we speaking and what are we saying? How (pardon the modernist cliché) are we to contribute to the future?

Eye-catching “graphics” and technical know-how are what the market desires—the surface, never the soul. As such, that is the emphasis in the classroom. There is nothing wrong with addressing a market need, especially if it provides an opportunity for

employment, but it becomes problematic when it is all we see. Are we content to just give the market what it wants by cranking out “professionalized” student after student? If so, are we not losing sight of our charge as faculty within a liberal arts setting? Is the notion of humanism at the center of graphic design so implausible? Rather than succumb to the market, I believe it is more profitable to teach in a manner that enables students to address both “real world” expectations while cultivating in them an absolute commitment to the pursuit of knowledge and to not think of these as mutually exclusive. The fact that design curricula may not allow for critical studies, design theory, and design history courses should not stop us. The solution in lieu of these is for educators to project an attitude that underscores the importance of inquiry. It is in the way we talk about and think about the work of students. Such an attitude necessitates a willingness to admit the liberal arts into the teaching of design. In so doing, the humanism central to the discipline becomes apparent.

Graphic design as a business of representation necessitates vigilance. It is not and has never been a one-sided conversation, though the pace and manner in which it is taught nowadays might lead one to think so. I believe that there exists in graphic design an underlying philanthropy that is routinely denied in the classroom. This denial is the result of a field that no longer leads but answers to the market. It is a nod to the “real world” and it coincides with the dumbing down of design education and the bucking of creative process. There is a way to arrive at a final, marketable, and intelligent “visual”, but to get there, educators must pave the way by taking a stance departmentally and pedagogically: Who are we? What do we wish to say through our teaching and through our students’ work? What are we “professing”? My point is to recommend theory, history, and research as a way for young designers to build an awareness of the culture in which they and their objects will live—to utilize these as a

means to consider every facet of a problem. In this way, they practice and live the discursive nature of design and respond in kind with a body of work that bears the mark of one who truly knows, which will no doubt alter the market's perception of the designer from abstruse jobber / hired hand / technician to indispensable resource.

The notion that professionalism will lead to graphic design's demise as put forth by FitzGerald is not far-fetched, given our deference to the market and the drive towards professionalization. Design has entered a kind of self-preservationist funk that isn't about innovation; it's about sticking around a while longer. The landscape will brighten once design educators and practitioners begin to think of their activities as more than bootlicking, and here the notion of having a stake in one's work is paramount. Of course, you can't have a stake unless you have the wherewithal to sustain it. Idealistic? Probably, but it is more than what the market asks.

1 *Emigre* #66, p. 37, 2003.

2 Here I have offered what I am certain is a gross distillation of theory, as my goal was to reveal that it is, in a rudimentary sense, natural to design. For a lucid exposition on the subject, please read Ellen Lupton and Abbott Miller's "Deconstruction in Graphic Design" (pp. 3–23) from their seminal book *Design Writing Research: Writing on Graphic Design* (Kiosk, 1996), in which they discuss the substance of design theory. Aside from clarifying its origins in literature and its subsequent dissemination into the arts, their essay affirms the notion that design is a product and practice of inquiry.

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**STYLE IS NOT
A FOUR LETTER
WORD**

Mr. Keedy

“Today, the emphasis on style over content in much of what is alleged to be graphic design and communication is, at best, puzzling.”

—Paul Rand, *Design, Form and Chaos*

“The work arises as a methodological consequence—not from streaming projects through some stylistic posture.”

—Bruce Mau, *Life Style*

“Looking at other magazines from all fields it seems that ‘serious’ content-driven publications don’t care how they look, whilst ‘superficial’ content-free ones resort to visual pyrotechnics.

—Editors, *DotDotDot*, issue no. 1

“Good design means as little design as possible.”

—Dieter Rams, *Omit the Unimportant*

“Style = Fart”

—Stefan Sagmeister

THERE HAS BEEN A LONG and continuing feud in design between style and content, form and function, and even pleasure and utility, to which Charles Eames answered, “Who would say that pleasure is not useful?”¹ Maybe we should call a truce, since it doesn’t seem like anyone is winning. Animosity towards style is pretty much a given in the design rhetoric of the twentieth century. But where did this antagonistic relationship between design and style come from? And more importantly what has it done for us?

At the end of the stylistic excess and confusion of the Victorian era, the architect Adolf Loos led the way to a simpler, progressive, and more profitable future. In 1908 he proclaimed, “I have discovered the following truth and presented it to the world: cultural evolution is synonymous with the removal of ornament from

articles in daily use.”² In his polemical and now famous essay “Ornament and Crime,” Adolf Loos established what would be the prevalent attitude towards ornament, pattern, decoration, and style in the twentieth century. He explained, “Shall every age have a style of its own and our age alone be denied one? By style they meant decoration. But I said, don’t weep! See, what makes our culture grand is its inability to produce a new form of decoration. We have overcome the ornament, we have won through the lack of ornamentation.” Far from being a period without style, or new ornament, the end of the nineteenth century was inundated with ornament and style. The Jugendstil, Vienna Secession, Wiener Werkstätte, Art Nouveau, and Arts and Crafts, were all in various stages of development. Loos was frustrated because a consensus on style no longer seemed possible, and he believed that “those who measure everything by the past impede the cultural development of nations and of humanity itself.” Sounding like an early example of “compassionate conservatism,” he explains, “I suffer the ornament of the Kafir, that of the Persian, that of the Slovak farmer’s wife, the ornaments of my cobbler, because they all have no other means of expressing their full potential.” Loos’s condescending conceit became “received wisdom” in modernist design, where “the lack of ornament is a sign of intellectual power.”

In “Ornament and Crime,” we see the modernist project as fundamentalist, puritanical, elitism being promoted as progressive enlightenment. Probably very few designers have actually read it, yet they all know that ornament and style are, if not criminal, at least suspect. As Loos points out, “The modern man who tattoos himself is a criminal or a degenerate. There are prisons where eighty percent of the inmates bear tattoos. Those who are tattooed but are not imprisoned are latent criminals or degenerate aristocrats. If a tattooed person dies at liberty, it is only that he died a few years before he committed a murder.” And, “The

man who daubs the walls with erotic symbols to satisfy an inner urge is a criminal or a degenerate. It is obvious that his urge overcomes man: such symptoms of degeneration most forcefully express themselves in public conveniences." The idea that ornament, style, and pleasure are "degenerate" is reinforced today by the fact that pop culture literally wallows in them. The easiest way to differentiate yourself from the all-pervasive "nobrow"³ monoculture we inhabit is to reject its excesses. Just say "no"—to ornament and style. But for Loos, the fact that ornament was a symptom of "degenerate" sensibilities was not its worst offence. The biggest problem he had with ornament was that it was not economical. As he explained, "Decorated plates are expensive, while white crockery, which is pleasing to the modern individual, is cheap. Whilst one person saves money, the other becomes insolvent," since "the lack of ornament results in reduced working hours and an increased wage. The Chinese carver works sixteen hours, the American laborer works eight hours."⁴ For Loos the modern American way, without ornament (or style and history) was not only the most progressive; it was the most cost-effective. Not surprisingly, Loos's style of boxy masses of marble, glass, and wood, became the style of corporate America.

LOOS WAS SUCCESSFUL AT DISCREDITING STYLE and elevating function and economics as the primary goals in design as opposed to older ideas like "truth, beauty, and power."⁵ But he did not achieve his main goal of eliminating ornament. As James Trilling points out in his book *Ornament, A Modern Perspective*, "He did something much more original. He reinvented it, with a completely new character and direction for the twentieth century."⁶ He did this by carefully choosing natural substances like marble and wood for their decorative surface effects, which were natural and therefore "authentic." Loos invented "an ornament without images, patterns, motifs, or history. Even this was not enough.

Cloaking his achievement in a diatribe against ornament itself, he gave us the only ornament we could pretend was no ornament at all. We went after the decoy and swallowed it whole, a feat of self-deception that shapes our visual culture to this day.”⁷ We can see evidence of this in the lack of sophistication in the use of pattern and ornamentation in contemporary graphic design. Or as Trilling puts it, “Historically, the abolition of recognizable form in ornament is not just a response to similar developments in painting. It is a final stage in the progressive weakening and dissolution that afflicted ornament throughout the nineteenth century. If we do not recognize the forms of modernist ornament as weak, it is because there are so few forms left to recognize.”

THAT LOOS’S IDEAS continue to resonate today is unquestionable. But that an elitist, deceptive, misogynistic, racist, xenophobic, money-grubbing rant would inspire such allegiance is troubling, to say the least. Once ornament was supposedly done away with, or at least “rehabilitated” into modernist dogma, one could have expected that it was only a matter of time before design itself would be recast as a crime against culture. And Hal Foster’s diatribe *Design and Crime* does exactly that. Loos condemned ornament for “damaging national economy and therefore its cultural development,” and now Foster tells us that today’s design is “a primary agent that folds us back into the near-total system of contemporary consumerism.”⁸ Foster claims that Art Nouveau designers of the past “resisted the effects of industry” but “there is no such resistance in contemporary design: it delights in postindustrial technologies, and it is happy to sacrifice the semi-autonomy of architecture and art to the manipulations of design.” And that “today you don’t have to be filthy rich to be projected not only as designer but as designed—whether the product in question is your home or your business, your sagging face (designer surgery), or your lagging personality (designer drugs), your historical memory (designer museums) or your DNA future (designer children).

Might this 'designed subject' be the unintended offspring of the 'constructed subject' so vaunted in postmodern culture? One thing seems clear: just when you thought the consumerist loop could get no tighter in its narcissistic logic, it did: design abets a near-perfect circuit of production and consumption, without much 'running room' for anything else."

The term "running-room" [Spielraum] is from Loos's friend Karl Krans, who tried to "show that there is a distinction between an urn and a chamber pot and that it is this distinction above all that provides culture with running-room." Or as Foster puts it, "objective limits are necessary for 'the running-room' that allows for the making of a liberal kind of subjectivity and culture." Obviously the fear is that if there are no "objective limits," and your ordinary chamber pot can be considered a work of art, then the "liberal subjectivity" of the art critic, expert, or connoisseur, is diminished to the lowly level of the "art" in question. It's one thing to exalt an urn, but quite another to extol the virtues of a chamber pot like a common sales clerk (or Duchamp?). Why come up with new ideas about design, when old prejudices will do?

The paucity of context or specificity in Foster's critique of design is only surpassed by its stunning lack of originality. Once again, design as "scapegoat" is seen as so vacuously amoral and apolitical that capitalism, mass media, globalization (etc.), have harnessed its mesmerizing emptiness to dupe an unsuspecting, uncritical (innocent?) public, into duplicitous submission. And design offers no "resistance"! I wish Foster would explain how the art world manages to offer "resistance" and "semi-autonomy" when you do have to be "filthy rich" to be a serious player in it. Talk about no running room! Will designers ever outrun this type of cornball caricature? At the end of the twentieth century, designers find themselves in a world in which ornament, decoration, and style are reduced to meaningless superficial effects; form is only to be derived from function;⁹ and design itself is little more than a commercial construct. What a load of crap.

FOSTER, LIKE MOST ART/CULTURE CRITICS of the twentieth century, seems to be unaware of the fact that culture was developed through design, and that the art culture industry that he is hermetically sealed in is a fairly recent development. Such critics are incapable of imagining that design could have what he calls “political situatedness of both autonomy and its transgression,” or “a sense of the historical dialect of disciplinarity and its contestation.” If only critics like Foster could allow themselves to see designers as actually possessing some autonomy and self-awareness, instead of reducing us all to commercial hacks, they might realize that design is a cultural practice worthy of their speculative interest. Unfortunately, typical of twentieth century critics, he is still prattling on about Art, so we’ll have to wait for the cultural critics of the twenty-first century for design to be of serious interest. Foster only sees design as a barrier to “resistance” (fight the power, right on!) and a threat to the “distinctions between practices,” (art is special!). Design is often erroneously conflated with marketing and consumerism to serve as a whipping boy, to enforce “disciplinarity,” and to keep us in our place. He is attacking the messenger because he doesn’t like the message. Design is just the messenger. The idea that art doesn’t matter is the message.

Foster acknowledges that Loos’s “anti-decorative dictate is a modernist mantra if ever there was one, and it is for the puritanical propriety inscribed in such words that postmodernists have condemned modernist like Loos in turn. But maybe times have changed again; maybe we are in a moment when distinctions between practices might be reclaimed or remade—without the ideological baggage of purity and propriety attached.” Now that the early modernist dream of “art into life”¹⁰ has succeeded, Foster (like Loos before him), would like to take it back out, and into the protective custody of the art world. Maybe instead of going back to the bad old days of art with a capital “A,” Foster should realize that we are entering an era of design with a capital “D.” Is it actually possible that people are looking at the museum’s

architecture, and browsing its gift shop, instead of the galleries, because the design is not only more fun, but more meaningful to them? Or are they just stupefied by the spectacle of commodification? In “The Age of Aesthetics” isn’t it design and style that will matter most? And does that mean that ideas and meaning are out? Not according to Virginia Postrel, who says in her book *The Substance of Style* that you can be “smart and pretty.”¹¹

POSTREL IS AN ECONOMICS COLUMNIST for *The New York Times*, and a past editor of *Reason* magazine. She has spoken at a number of design venues, including TED 2004. Far from being an “old school” economic critic like Thorstein Veblen, she puts a positive spin on “conspicuous consumption,”¹² and admits, “In a sense my book is a defense of the consumer society.”¹³ Thus, conservatives tend to be predisposed to listen to her, and liberals of the *Adbusters* type do not. Her reception by designers has been luke warm at best. It is ironic that designers were more supportive of Naomi Klein’s *No Logo*¹⁴ book, in which the best advice she could muster for them is that they should quit. Postrel has a much better grasp of design in context, and is an advocate for design, if not designers. And as an economist and libertarian, she starts from the assumption that free markets and free choice are, as Martha Stewart would say, “good things.” Postrel explains, “Globalization has brought a wide assortment of formerly exotic-seeming styles and products into the mainstream. The challenge is to learn to accept that aesthetic pleasure is an autonomous good, not the highest or the best but one of many plural, sometimes conflicting, and frequently unconnected sources of value.”

Postrel breaks up the old bipolar debates between style and substance, or as designers say it, form and function, by recognizing that pleasure is an equally important part of the equation. Artists have been talking about the value of pleasure since day one, but to have an economist say that pleasure is an important value in design—well, it’s a lot more than most designers have been willing to

say. She takes it even farther by warning us against “falling into the puritanical mind-set that denies the value of aesthetic pleasure and seeks always to link it with evil.” She believes designers should be asking themselves “How can I provide pleasure and meaning?” Pleasure is not exactly a hot topic among designers. I don’t think today’s information architects and media directors are ready to admit to such sybaritic impulses. Problem solving, communicating, informing, identifying, or branding: yes. Pleasure? No. But as Postrel points out, “Everyone else is also solving problems and contributing to strategy. The question is what problems can you uniquely solve? Where’s your value-added? If you try to sell yourselves as another sort of engineer, the engineers will just scoff at you—and rightly so.”¹⁵ It is as if she pointed out that not only does the design “emperor have no clothes,” but he is pleasuring himself as well.

Instead of pleasure, perhaps Postrel should have used the more genteel Victorian idea of “repose”¹⁶ as the emotional response one hopes for from design. But Postrel speaks boldly. She even dares to refute the modernist idea of authenticity, described in its various forms as purity, tradition, and the “aura” or “patina” of history. She explains that they are defined “based on rules that have little to do with the desires or purposes of those who create, use, or inhabit the subjects of the critique” and that “‘authenticity’ becomes little more than a rhetorical club to enforce the critic’s taste.” Speaking as the voice of the people, she goes on to say, “We can decide for ourselves what is authentic for our purposes, what matches surface with substance, form with identity. We can define authenticity from the inside out. This approach to authenticity challenges the ideal of impersonal authority, replacing it with personal, local knowledge.” She believes “what’s truly authentic is change and cultural evolution.” I applaud her ability to deflate the “gas bags” of authenticity and the puritanical scolds of pleasure and consumerism. But she goes on to say, “Aesthetics have become too important to be left to the aesthetes.” I question the

faith that she puts in the “we,” as in “we the people,” with bad taste and no sense of style, to make the best choices. She is careful not to completely discount expertise, as she explains: “There’s a difference between expertise and gatekeeping. Expertise tells you how to achieve what you find aesthetically pleasing. Gatekeeping tells you what you should find aesthetically pleasing. It’s the gatekeepers who are upset—people who want to dictate the one true style, whether they’re arbiters of fashions in clothing or in architecture.”

No doubt that is true, but the idea that it is the expert’s job to tell you how to achieve what you have already decided is aesthetically pleasing is even worse. Yes, I could ask Julia Child to help me make a chili cheese dog, or Luciano Pavarotti to sing happy birthday, but that would just be stupid. And it is the expert’s job to tell us when we are being stupid. We don’t have to agree, or take their advice, but we should know what those who have more experience, knowledge, and talent, think. Experts should be posted at the “gates” of culture, because the idea that anyone has the ability to lock them is absurd. Unfortunately for us, today’s “gatekeepers” are not like Ruskin and Morris, or any of the self-proclaimed tastemakers of the past, whose advice was sought, if not always heeded. Today’s arbiters of style seem to be people with individually cultivated tastes and opinions, but they are in fact corporate brands like Martha Stuart (Omnimedia), Michael Graves, and Tommy Hilfiger, whose “opinions” are really just products. And today’s design academics, critics, and journalists wouldn’t presume to be “expert” in anything as potentially contestable, embarrassing, and unimportant as taste. The only real experts and connoisseurs you are likely to run into today are on “make-over” tv shows and e-Bay. Taste used to be something you developed and learned with the guidance of experts over time; now it’s just something you buy. After all, “nobody ever went broke underestimating the taste of the American public.”¹⁷

THE IDEA OF TASTE IS PROBLEMATIC and widely contested today. Many people have come to resent high standards of taste as the ability to transform our wardrobe, living room, and bodies increasingly becomes an obligation to do so. Where does it all end? How do we keep from being completely consumed by the demands for more style and better taste? Postrel doesn't think that will happen. She believes "most of us won't make that cost/benefit calculation," and in the end people's good sense will prevail. She says, "My own aesthetic preference is to let people do whatever they want." "We live in a momentary—often delightful—chaos that shall inevitably morph into better practices through trial and error. Eventually, aesthetic harmony shall prevail." But why would it? She should know that markets don't always correct themselves by themselves. Sometimes they crash. The "powers that be," the "stakeholders," the ones with the most to lose, are constantly monitoring and regulating the market to keep it going. Yet, in the "age of aesthetics," it is the "gatekeepers" that Postrel would throw out. When pressed for some criteria of judgment, she says, "Quantifying aesthetic value is very difficult. It's not like there is one thing you can measure." Yes Virginia, it is difficult, that's why you ask an expert—you know, someone who actually knows what they are talking about.

Good taste is learned, but no one is teaching it anymore. High culture is supposed to be a reflection of us at our best, while pop culture is a reflection of us at our happiest. The pursuit of happiness and the pursuit of excellence are not the same thing. Style may be coming back in style, but taste is not. What we have now is not so much a "democratization of taste" as a disavowal of any standards. A democratic culture does not mean mob rule. A democratic approach to style would include excellence. But the Darwinian free-market commercial populism Postrel imagines, puts too much faith in the market's ability to make the best cost/benefit choices in terms of style. Postrel says, "In the technocratic era of the one best way, correct taste was a matter of

rational expertise 'this is good design' not personal pleasure 'I *like* this.'" However, since she is so keen to point out that style has meaning, I wonder if it has occurred to her that very often the style that says "I *like* this" has a meaning that says "I'm an idiot." Or is that just the price you pay for pleasure? Not necessarily, because as she points out, "The values of design itself—function, meaning, and pleasure—can exist independently of each other." No doubt this is where all the confusion comes in, and where experience is needed to establish criteria and evaluation. The fact is, as the popularity of tv "design" shows and all those shelter/lifestyle magazines and books prove, people want to be educated about style. But designers are not even debating issues of style and taste among themselves, much less instructing the hoi polloi. They seem to be operating on the assumption that it doesn't matter any more; they are no longer in the business of dictating taste, because there are no rules any more.

IN HIS BOOK ON POSTMODERNISM in graphic design, Rick Poynor explains that: "*No More Rules*'s central argument is that one of the most significant developments in graphic design, during the last two decades, has been designers' overt challenges to the conventions or rules that were once widely regarded as constituting good practice."¹⁸ By using the cliché of "rule breaking," Poynor effectively restricts postmodernism in design to its reactionary emergence and validates the popular misconception that postmodernism ended once its initial shock was absorbed. This reflects the current feeling in design that since there are no more rules, we have arrived at a post-postmodern, post-taste, post-style, and post-design free-for all. In a somewhat nostalgic sounding tone of resignation, Poynor says "If fundamental systemic change feels unlikely, then this tends to suggest that the postmodern condition will be our reality for the foreseeable future, imposing operational constraints or 'rules' of its own, whether we like it or not." But the ideas that designers started exploring in the 80s and

90s, like deconstruction, appropriation, technology, authorship, and opposition, which Poynor skillfully outlines in his book, seem more like an attempt to establish new rules, practices, and disciplinarity in place of the “received wisdom” of modernism. Not just rule breaking, or a discarding of rules, but an exploration, expansion, and redefinition of the boundaries of design as a dynamic self-organizing system of possibilities, instead of a top-down hierarchy of rules. It was a project that was “stampeded” by the dot-com “gold rush” and “branding round-up” that seems to have changed the design profession’s priorities.

Poynor concludes *No More Rules* by asking: “Given some of the problems of postmodern visual communication discussed in the book, what forms in terms of style might an oppositional graphic design assume at this point?” Setting aside the question of why style has to be “oppositional,” my answer is a style that continues to develop and deploy the critical, pluralistic, decentered, post-modern strategies outlined in his book. A style that celebrates the aesthetic pleasure of the unique, idiosyncratic, individual through ornamentation, pattern, and decoration, as well as celebrating community and social responsibility through historical continuity. A style that resists easy codification and assimilation with strategic and formal complexity. OK? But talk is cheap. Designers want to be shown, not told. And that is exactly the problem. Until designers get past their “monkey see, monkey do” approach to designing, they will just be going around in the same old circles, doing the same old “new” work. That is why designers need to think about some different (if not new) ideas about style that come from “outside” the usual discourse. Like Virginia Postrel, who says, “We can enjoy the age of look and feel, using surface to add pleasure and meaning to the substance of our lives.” And James Trilling, who says that designers should use “the transformative power of ornament” to “affirm a pervasive, age-old dissatisfaction with structural necessity as the sole determinant of artistic form. The primary function of ornament—and it is a function,

make no mistake—is to remedy this dissatisfaction by introducing free choice and variation into even those parts of a work that appear most strictly shaped by structural or functional needs.” It’s time to “decriminalize” ornament because “communication need not be symbolic, any more than function need be mechanical. Before one even selects a pattern or motif, the decision to use ornament conveys a wealth of meaning, no less real or powerful for being inchoate.”¹⁹ The problem is, most designers’ ideas about style and ornament have not advanced much since the beginning of the last century.

Unfortunately, the single-minded pursuit of structural meaning and authenticity, decorated only with irony in the aesthetics of the twentieth century, has left style, ornamentation, and beauty in the hands of amateurs. That is where we find an orgy of stylistic expression and exploitation (such as it is). Go to your local shopping mall and you will find Thomas Kinkade, the “painter of light” whose mass-produced contemplations of the sublime represent beauty. And tattoo parlors where “degenerate aristocrats” indulge their “criminal” tastes—one of the few places you are likely to find any interest in ornamentation any more. Or look for a Restoration Hardware or a Design Within Reach, places for “those who measure everything by the past” and who “have no other means of expressing their full potential” except to decorate their homes in a “made for tv” historical style. This is all the proof we need that there is no more “running room” left in the shopping mall of contemporary culture, and we have no one to blame but ourselves. We are our own experts; we know what we like, and we like it like this.

MODERNISM MADE THE ISSUE OF STYLE much easier for designers to deal with, since it gave them a style that they could pretend was not a style. But technology, multiculturalism, globalism, postmodernism, and the “democratization of taste” are demanding a more sophisticated response. Digital technology has

TYPE NOW

A REVIEW BY
David Cabianca

Type now: a manifesto, plus work so far

BY FRED SMEIJERS

HYPHEN PRESS, LONDON, 2003.

Type now: a manifesto, plus work so far was produced as part of the second Gerrit Noordzij Prize awarded to Fred Smeijers in 2001. It was released to accompany an exhibit of the same name that opened at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague in March 2004, and traveled to the St. Bride Institute in London later in April. Smeijers's earlier book, *Counterpunch*, was published in 1996.

My first reading of Fred Smeijers's book, *Type now*, was as a student, as someone who wanted to apply the information inside to use in his own work. And being a student of type design at the University of Reading, I am aware how rare it is to find material written by a contemporary type designer in English. Although there is certainly no shortage of talent or erudition in the United States, American designers seem to be reluctant or perhaps too busy to put their ideas into a book. Type design is a rather arcane art, one that in fact requires a great deal of first-hand experience to apprehend. It is not a topic easily conveyed in a book, particularly since, as one of our instructors, Gerard Unger, put it: "there are no rules, only conventions." Many formal decisions are specific to the idiosyncrasies of a design itself. A particular design can succeed in breaking with convention by optically compensating for what otherwise would be considered an imperfection in the design, so it is understandably difficult to produce a book that is specific about something so malleable. This being the case, any volume is generally a welcome contribution in a field of scarce documentation.

I am greatly reducing the number of viewpoints, but at Reading we are asked to approach type design from a functional perspective: "How do you want your typeface *to work*?" [Gerry Leonidas], and a design perspective: "What do you want your typeface *to do*?" [Gerard Unger]. Upon meeting Fred Smeijers during a visit to the Plantin-Moretus Museum in Antwerp, Smeijers asked us to approach type design as philosophers: "What do you want your typeface *to be*?" Upon further readings of *Type now*, it is clear that

it is this philosophical attitude that underlines much of Smeijers's book. The question of being or essence in typeface design is not something to which I had given much thought. In fact, it was not something that I linked to the design of type, but Smeijers explained that, when starting out, it is necessary to position your typeface relative to the discipline and to history. There are characteristics that are particular to these respective categories that can help define and focus your own output: "If you can position it, then you can start to think critically about it. Is it a Didot, a Garalde, a transitional, etc. ...?" Smeijers asked us how we distinguish our typefaces from the designs of others, much like how we distinguish ourselves in personal tastes of art, dress, or film choices.

But *Type now* is not a manual for type design. It is a manifesto, a glossary, a type specimen, and a personal history. Its language follows the format of the manifesto: it is sometimes pedantic, usually not self-reflective and mostly prescriptive. Central to the book is a discussion of ethics, which culminates in Smeijers' "Code of Conduct." Much of Smeijers's concerns in *Type now* have to do with the nature of the copy. In a tone similar to the distinctions made by Plato in discerning the nature of art, Smeijers advocates an awareness of authenticity, an acknowledgement of referents, and the discernment of the original from its derivatives. These are not new concerns. The technology that enables copying and font piracy is perhaps more easily available and disseminated than ever before. But I should be more explicit. Smeijers's concerns are with *design* piracy, the copying of design attributes that are attributable to other designs—particularly contemporary ones—and specifically his own type designs.

Software allows for the production of a "workable" typeface almost instantaneously. Unlike the years that it took a punchcutter to achieve master status, programs like FontLab provide instant output. And while other arts, such as architecture, might require

years of personal development before one is trusted with the opportunity to design a building, type design in 2004 is quite literally an overnight prospect. As a student of type design, I can attest to the difficulty of attempting to distinguish one's own creative output. Learning "to see" the minute details of form takes a considerable amount of study, and developing the ability to channel that knowledge into an original design takes a similar commitment to practice. But the chastising language of *Type now* does not offer much direction on how to achieve originality. The closest the book comes to suggesting a method of any sort appears when Smeijers notes that W.A. Dwiggins and Bram de Does achieved originality by pursuing designs "that they themselves felt a need for." And in the case of Hans Eduard Meier's *Syntax*, "Here a personal need to create a humanist sans serif made all the difference." (p. 26) What these needs and differences are—other than original—remains unstated.

When Meier released *Syntax* in 1968, the design world was already well smitten with Helvetica (1957), Univers (1957), and the arid nature of Swiss modernism. External to design, society was questioning the staid values of rational behavior and corporate hegemony via the sexual revolution, drug culture, feminism, and labor unrest. These concerns may not have contributed directly to Meier's thinking, but they suggest that cracks began to appear in the ethos of a monolithic understanding of modernism. They provide a conceptual backdrop to interpreting the possible circumstances surrounding a design's influences. When Smeijers describes his motivation behind the design of Renard Italic, he describes his process as an attempt to place himself in the culture of sixteenth-century Antwerp. Jan Middendorp notes in his recent publication *Dutch Type*: "As Van den Keere never cut a complete italic, Renard's italic is a new design, made in the spirit of the period. Smeijers did a mental exercise, trying to imagine Hendrik van den Keere's situation at the time when a hypothetical

italic could have been created.”* Smeijers goes on to say in *Dutch Type*, “I am sure that [Van den Keere] would have wanted to emulate the best italic available. Which at that moment, was Granjon’s Ascenonica Cursive. [...] I think Van den Keere would have given it more of a rhythm, which is what I have tried in Renard Italic.”† Renard Italic is no mere act of mimicry; it is a completely original design. But it is these pursuits of Smeijers that frame his design process—what he determines as *needs* other than originality—that are largely absent from *Type now* and would have greatly advanced an argument for the ethical obligation to create original form by providing a conceptual apparatus with which to understand the act of designing type.

Also absent from the book, but present in the exhibit, are the numerous sketches and studies that Smeijers went through in the production of his designs. Much of the less-polished interim work is more interesting than the final finished pieces reproduced in the color section of *Type now, work so far* because they allow you to trace Smeijers’ thought process. In contrast to the book, the exhibit is not so much a display of *Type now* as it is a record of how Smeijers has reached this point now. One such piece not illustrated in the book, but quite illuminating, is set of lettering exercises that Smeijers drew as a student in Arnhem. The two studies labeled as “Noordzij-like exercises” depict letters as a set of an interconnected “kit of parts.” Upon seeing it, the relationship between Smeijers’s interest in stencil lettering and the constructed nature of many of his designs like Lambrusco and Arnhem becomes quite clear.

While Hyphen’s pocket format is suitable for linear reading, *Type now* suffers because of it. I found myself repeatedly flipping back and forth between sections trying to make comparisons and connections between what were often subtle distinctions that

* Jan Middendorp, *Dutch Type*, Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2004, p. 243.

† Fred Smeijers, quoted in *ibid.*

often got lost as I moved between pages. This was particularly intrusive when trying to compare typefaces in the specimen section and to connect captions with images. Although the inclusion of additional material collected for the accompanying exhibit and a more generous size would have substantially increased the cost, the considerable desire for a book of this kind would have offset the expense of a more lavish monograph.

The value of *Type now* lies in the fact that it poses questions about the meaning of action. Taking Smeijers at his word, type design responds to an absence. Smeijers asks questions about the value of our products, about a design's significance, and contribution to the canon because type design is a philosophical endeavor for Smeijers, not solely a functional one. All of Smeijers's type designs "work" in the pedestrian sense of the word, but they also exceed the confines of function. They attempt to address concerns beyond an immediate need. In keeping with a comparison made by Smeijers to Dwiggin, De Does and Meier, Smeijers's typefaces respond to a desire to manifest what is otherwise absent from our design culture. Perhaps in Smeijers's case, it is his direct experience with punch cutting (and calligraphy) that provides him with an exceptional grasp of scale. In a digital world where scale is meaningless, Smeijers is able to translate his tactile understanding of form to some very sensual and original type designs that provide a visual richness and unique character to an often monotone landscape.

David Cabianca is a freelance graphic designer in New York City. He studied at Princeton, Cranbrook Academy of Art and is currently completing his MA in Typeface Design at the University of Reading.

THE READERS RESPOND

Send comments to editor@emigre.com

Dear Emigre,

I'd missed *Emigre* #66 on the newsstands, and just picked it up after a recent discussion on *Speak Up* piqued my curiosity. On the occasion of Rick Poyner's new book [*No More Rules*] on the heyday of postmodernism in graphic design, all sorts of people have been crawling out of the woodwork to decry the deeply confusing, overly polemical, "theoretical" design of that long-ago era.* Just in Sam Potts's review, theory's got a "Postmodern Postmortem," a "chalk outline," and dies at least twice. Did I mention that we're at "the end of the theoretical era?" Phew! Despite the drubbing it's getting from the new new Turks, however, I think theory is still alive and well.

A "theory," if you want to strip the negative connotations off, is an idea about how the world works, could work, or should work. In the design sense, a "theory" is how we conceive of our work in relation to our audiences, our clients, the history of the profession, current fashion, student loans, and so on.

If you say "graphic design is a service," or "design should help companies be more profitable," you too are working with a theory—see, it's still alive and kicking! The thing is, while "that crazy pomo stuff" is a pretty easy straw man to knock down, deconstruction fits in a long tradition of pretty sophisticated—and hugely varied—design theories. Somehow, I can't help but feel that preaching a straight-up "obey the markets" philosophy (followed by a bit of anti-intellectual posturing) sells our whole history short. No wonder David Cabianca is frustrated! If doctors were like designers, they'd still be scratching their heads trying to figure out whether they should treat a cancer patient with chemo or with leeches. History is important, our culture is important, and designers have a role to play in making the world we'll see a generation from now.

To be honest, I'm pretty embarrassed at having written that last sen-

tence. After thousands of essays written, hundred of books published, dozens and dozens of international design conferences held, do we really have to ask, from here in 2004, if theory is dead?

Apparently, for some significant portion of our profession, we don't even have to ask. It's a foregone conclusion. While I was skeptical on my first read of Cabianca's arguments demanding critical language from those in our profession, I'm becoming more and more convinced that if we don't practice and promote a more nuanced terminology, design criticism is bound to get trapped in these shallow puddles indefinitely.

Yours from the academy,

Matt Waggoner

Dear Emigre,

I've noticed a trend in the industry recently. It goes like this. Young designer does great flashy work, knows the right people, gets published. This leads to more and better projects, more published work, the establishment of a style, and the birth of a star. This is nothing new, it's been going full force since the 80s and before. However, there is a new twist to the story. I'll call it "The Bono Effect." That is, the hot designer, now a lot older and a little richer, starts to question the industry. I'll call this the "Biting the Hand that Feeds It Effect." This effect leads the designer to become politicized. Which in turn leads to the notion that graphic design can somehow save the world. Much like the bang-up job rock and roll is currently doing saving us from ourselves. These designers become their own personal Bono. But being egotistical hotshots, they can't simply leave it as a personal thing. They leverage their cult of personality and begin to stump for a platform that goes something like this. "Other, smaller, not hotshot designers, do not follow in my footsteps in an attempt to achieve design greatness. No, follow my new teaching. Turn your backs on your clients. Do not attempt to make money or slick vapid design as I have done. But rise up and make earth-friendly, politically charged, largely pro-bono work. Leave the fame and riches to me and my cronies, you don't want it, it's hollow, trust me."

* Incidentally, after the recent week-long Reagan hagiography, it looks like we're going to see another few rounds of ideologues dragging ol' Bill Clinton through the mud—gosh, it seems like only yesterday! It makes me wonder when we'll see "Cult of the Ugly" reprinted.

If I have to read one more manifesto or academic rant signed by a bunch of graphic design bad-boys and corporate stiffes who've turned over a new leaf I'm going to be sick.

Get down off your horse Bono.

And the rest of you, get back to work, we've got graphic design to make.

Dan Stiles

Dear *Emigre*,

So I read the latest issue last night (*Emigre* #66). As always, I agreed with some authors, disagreed with others, and some just made me mad.

Perfect.

I was sad to hear that your subscription rate has dropped so much in this newest incarnation. I've been with you off and on for just about the whole thing. As my career has moved on from graphic design, I find that *Emigre* is the only design periodical that remains interesting.

What really struck me about this one, though, was the second-to-last bit in the whole issue; a letter from James Waite.

Before lambasting *Emigre* and its "second-rate insecure designers," he treats us to his own personal manifesto garnered from 15 years of practice. I'd like to paraphrase my understanding of it:

1. Reject any criticism of graphic design as negativity.
2. Six Rules:
 - 2.1. Client success is the only measure of success.
 - 2.2. Don't use foo-foo design or art words.
 - 2.3. Ask good questions.
 - 2.4. Use the easiest solution.
 - 2.5. Only give one option.
 - 2.6. Suck up for more work and diss other designers.
3. Don't accept any advice. I hate Cranbrook.
4. No foo-foo design, art, or literary words. My mom doesn't understand them.
5. I'm embarrassed to be a designer.
6. Steal other people's work. A well known artist did it, so it's ok.
7. Be intolerant and demanding, and be sure to use every latest whiz bang tech trend.
8. I hate *Emigre*.

9. I wish I could draw.

10. I wish I could program.

I think that covers it pretty well. I actually agree with the “ask good questions” thing.

So why did you include this letter? If it’s self-flagellation you’re after, surely there are less laughable *Emigre*-haters out there?

Keep up the good work, I’ll be around.

Rick Mullarky

Dear *Emigre*,

This is a message from the upper middle of the lower middle middle class, intellectually unaccredited, nondesigning design practitioner.

It’s been a great start to the 21st century. I am so glad we’ve been repealing all those affirmative action programs. It’s been so obvious these past 40 odd years that the African Americans are dead on equal to white Americans. Is it our fault they just don’t want to take advantage of their god given equality? We can’t help it if so many of them want to end up in jail. They have potential, just like the rest of us. I’ve seen rich black people. That’s what I’m talking about; when the rich get richer, we all get richer. I mean, why do we need to sign some Kyoto protocol or wealth tax reform to keep our industrialists from acquiring more money thus preventing it to trickle down to us? As long as we keep those homosexual Mexican Muslims in their place these here are good times. Graphic design is just one of the industries benefiting from these glorious times. Our system identity work has blown up to big time branding buckaroos. We are motion designers, new media designers, interaction designers and now experience designers. We are even starting up some phd design programs. Yeehaw!!! Good times, good times. Sure right now there’s a little bump on the road of prosperity, but it’s nothin’ that this blessed American military industrial complex can’t overcome.

There were some pissed off people in Seattle during 1999. Their protest amounted to a drop in the global transnationalist bucket of bottled Evian water. Then in 2000 and on, there arose in the graphic design scene some dialogues concerning the insidious nature of market driven forces. Considering that the first drop of this nature from 1964 has since evaporated, the 36 year momentous build up to a second deluge has amounted to

another drip. What the First Things First¹ signers, Clement Mok², and Terry Irwin³ don't understand concerning the unprecedented environmental, social and cultural crises; cultural interventions, social marketing campaigns, books, magazines, exhibitions, educational tools, television programs, films, charitable causes; information design projects; lasting and democratic forms of communication; immense unacknowledged control over public discourse; taking on the really difficult problems facing a troubled planet; designing effective, meaningful messages, craft more useful and responsible artifacts and design for experiences that enhance the quality of life for all species on the planet; is that it:

- a) pays nothing,
- b) doesn't have enough of itself to go around,
- c) is really "boring" to do, ie, not "cool",

because at a certain point eating peanut butter sandwiches by the window unit in my one bedroom apartment just won't cut it.

I have bills to pay, and right now in America there is no monetary profit to be made by helping the world. Corporations interested in anything beyond fiscal responsibility don't exist, so how can I work for them? And those jobs for museums, non-profits, the culture sector, they don't pay jack. And if they do, there aren't enough of them to go around for someone as talentless as I am. Living without corporate funding I'd have to re-evaluate my design lifestyle and do without my "fill in your preferred designer car" and "fill in your preferred designer furniture" and worry about paying off my credit cards, insurances, mortgages, loans, etc. in a timely manner. I can choose clients like I can choose to have talent. Only few designers have the privilege to pick and choose clients that are truly doing something positive in society; I'll have to settle with being a pawn in some corporate—making shareholders wealthier—agenda. (Most First Things First manifesto signers are either from "socialist" countries or are academicians whose incomes are subsidized).

The other non-corporate avenue of consumer labeling, information mapping, civic wayfinding, or universal design and accessibility that belong to the world of the Nielsens, Normans Wurmans, Tufte, etc. are so not sexy when you put them up against the Valicentis, Seguras, Sagmeisters, Carsons, Cahans and crew. I just want to be hip like all those superstar designers I see who have their own books, are in all the design annuals and

are profiled in rad magazines like *Emigre*, *Eye*, and *Idea* (I like how those magazines keep me on the cutting edge ahead of the American game by showing all that is going on in Japan, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the rest of the world). Afterall, with the scales of our economic and political institutions reaching beyond the average citizens capacity to know what is going on, why would I want to be involved in something as boring and obscure as creating systems that would help the average citizen be part of wise decision-making policies?

The average citizen's life is becoming more complicated because of the saturated media environment that won't let up. The ever-expanding definition, responsibility and role of what a graphic type-book-information-environmental-exhibition-interaction-interface-motion-experience designer does is caused by designers who want more excitement, more money, more legitimacy or more self-esteem, and this has created a swampy mush of crap to wade through. What Rudy VanderLans⁴ and Michael Bierut⁵ don't understand concerning the relationship between the graphic designer and their responsibility to the visual culture/world is that:

- a) graphic designers are not in a position of controlling anything,
 - b) graphic designers are not inherently/intrinsically responsible for controlling anything,
 - c) graphic designers as citizens are inherently/intrinsically in a position of control,
- because my eyes are only on the kerning, tracking, leading and other 2-dimensional spatial relationships.

If I were to be held responsible for anything (positive or negative), I'd only accept half of it; the other half would go to the client. And this is all based on the assumption that I have an "equal" relationship with the client in respect to the creation of a product/message and how it visually/functionally engages society. I am just a service provider to the entity from which the greens flow. They come to me with their agenda and I visually facilitate it. They are in the driver's seat of their car on their road to profitville. They have their plan and I am their henchman. For me to take control of my design decisions is to take a stance against my client's business practices and therefore undermining the whole logic of his institution (knowing the price of everything but the cost of nothing).

I'd like to see a tally of graphic designers working in America today who

truly feel their clients are offering a product that:

- a) embodies the spirit of progress and true innovation,
- b) respects the consumer/citizen/human,
- c) respects the environment,

How many designers have the balls to stand up and call out those profiteering corporados and take them to task?

We are living in America, home of capitalism, where the cultural landscape is owned by marketing, advertising and bean counters; where graphic designers argue that a typeface design is a Westerner's marketing tool selling the agenda of the 1st world industrialized nation phonetic writing system; where the *status quo* is a proven formula; where you wait for the extraordinary visionaries to do their thing and then copy it the best you can but not so much that you get sued. Yeah sure, current dialogs in AIGA are about getting a seat at the table of the corporate process but we don't even have an invitation to the party. Not one dialog addresses the philosophical elephant in the room: corporations don't give a donkey-doo about anything beyond making the shareholders money. There is nothing in their soul-less, moral-less, ethic-less fiber of their being that would make them care about human dignity or environmental sustainability.

Heads down in my craft. Hey man, I'm just doin' my job. My job is visually creating a sense of innovation/differentiation among products that aren't different or innovative. Clement Mok just wants to prove how the inclusion of the designer in the corporate agenda will result in some corporate cha-ching. (To see AIGA case studies showing how AIGA is concerned with the businessman and not the citizen go to: <http://designing.aiga.org/content.cfm/casestudies>) This isn't about graphic designers being responsible, or even about corporations being responsible. The corporations are composed of employees and shareholders, who are also consumers, who are also citizens, who are also mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews, who also are humans and everyone shall pass the buck. Who is in the drivers seat now?

Combine the state of general education today with the state of graphic design education in America today and what you get is not pretty; a critical public who thinks FOX news is actually fair and balanced, and graphic design curriculums that serve as trade schools generating form-making peons for the advertising work force.

What Andrew Blauvelt⁶ doesn't understand concerning his critical autonomy of graphic design:

- a) graphic design without a collaborator supplying content is a chicken without a head,
- b) this has been going on the last 15 years at graphic design grad programs to no avail.

I can't design typefaces, so what other graphic wares can I hock?

Graphic design doesn't have the industrial design or architecture model of the design and build, "make it and they will come." An industrial designer can make objects targeted towards a user without the need of a client—the enduser is the client. Although the financial and technological backing of a client entity (Herman Miller, Steelcase) is nice, individual entrepreneurship can exist.

Graphic design on the other hand doesn't have self-contained artifacts that can be created or sold (unless you count the design "Me" monographs, which I don't). What am I gonna sell? Typeface choices without type? Grid systems without the story? Or word/image juxtapositions without the word or the image? But maybe with all those nifty things my four year BFA degree taught me about my craft, I don't need clients, and even though I'm not a writer I can supply my own content, I can become an artist-designer. I can join the McFetridge/McGinness⁷ cadre and prove how valuable my discipline is to the world by showing and selling my deep, deep critical avant garde polemical autonomous design work on the white walls of the gallery circuit to a select group of white gallery goers with cashola to burn so they can hang it on their finely wallpapered dining room walls.

Who are the designers working on these polemical projects (so AOL Time Warner Brothers can co-opt it and stick it in their next annual report)?

Where are all those state subsidized-graphic designers who don't need *status quo* clients?

Who can work in research labs and have their experiments blow up in their faces but won't die or suffer injury because of the protection of their grant supplied plexiglass barrier?

Who are the designers designing designs that incenses Steven Heller to call them "ugly"?

The old Cranbrook guard of the late 80s and early 90s have disappeared. Katherine McCoy departed to IIT. The CalArts mid 90s guard have all but

fizzled. Lorraine Wild left the CalArts steering wheel some time ago. The late 90s grads have all succumbed to the corporate advertising branding machine. And the early 00s grads...

The Orrs, Hawkins, McDonoughs new age ecosystems hoity toity people and the designers who read them have to rely on individual responsible humans for the revolution to happen and not on the field of (graphic) designers. The citizens will have to demand it (don't ask me how the citizens will know to demand it, hopefully they won't wait till it shows up in their backyard), 'cause the corporations/government/universities won't. What were the graphic designers doing during the labor rights movement, women's suffrage movement, and the civil rights movement? How do I sign up for the listserv that speaks of creating a better human, a better citizen, a better politician, a better business leader? After all those things happen, maybe then we will get schools graduating critical designers bringing in the new age of graphic design with its newly hatched fresh revolutionary resonant forms based on a sound ideological framework. I worry about many things before worrying about graphic design. Relative to the rest of the world, America is doing fine; how else could you explain the existence of gay African American Republicans.⁸ Everything is fine. Life is good. Good times, good times.

Tuan Phan

- 1 First Things First manifesto 1964, Ken Garland, London. First Things First manifesto 2000, Essex, London, New York, Sacramento, Amsterdam, Frankfurt.
- 2 "Designers: a Time for Change," *Communication Arts*, May/June 2003.
- 3 "Crisis in Perception," *Communication Arts*, Photography Annual 2003.
- 4 "Introduction," *Emigre* #64, 2003.
- 5 Michael Bierut and his often cited William Golden quote, addressed to the *Ninth International Design Conference*, Aspen, 1959: "I happen to believe that the visual environment... improves each time a designer produces a good design—and in no other way."
- 6 "Towards Critical Autonomy: or can Graphic Design Save Itself?," *Emigre* #64, 2003.
- 7 Geoff McFetridge Ryan McGuiness showing their graphic designs at art galleries like Houston. <http://www.wehaveaproblem.com/>
- 8 ie, Abner Mason, former president of the Log Cabin Republicans.

MAX KISMAN

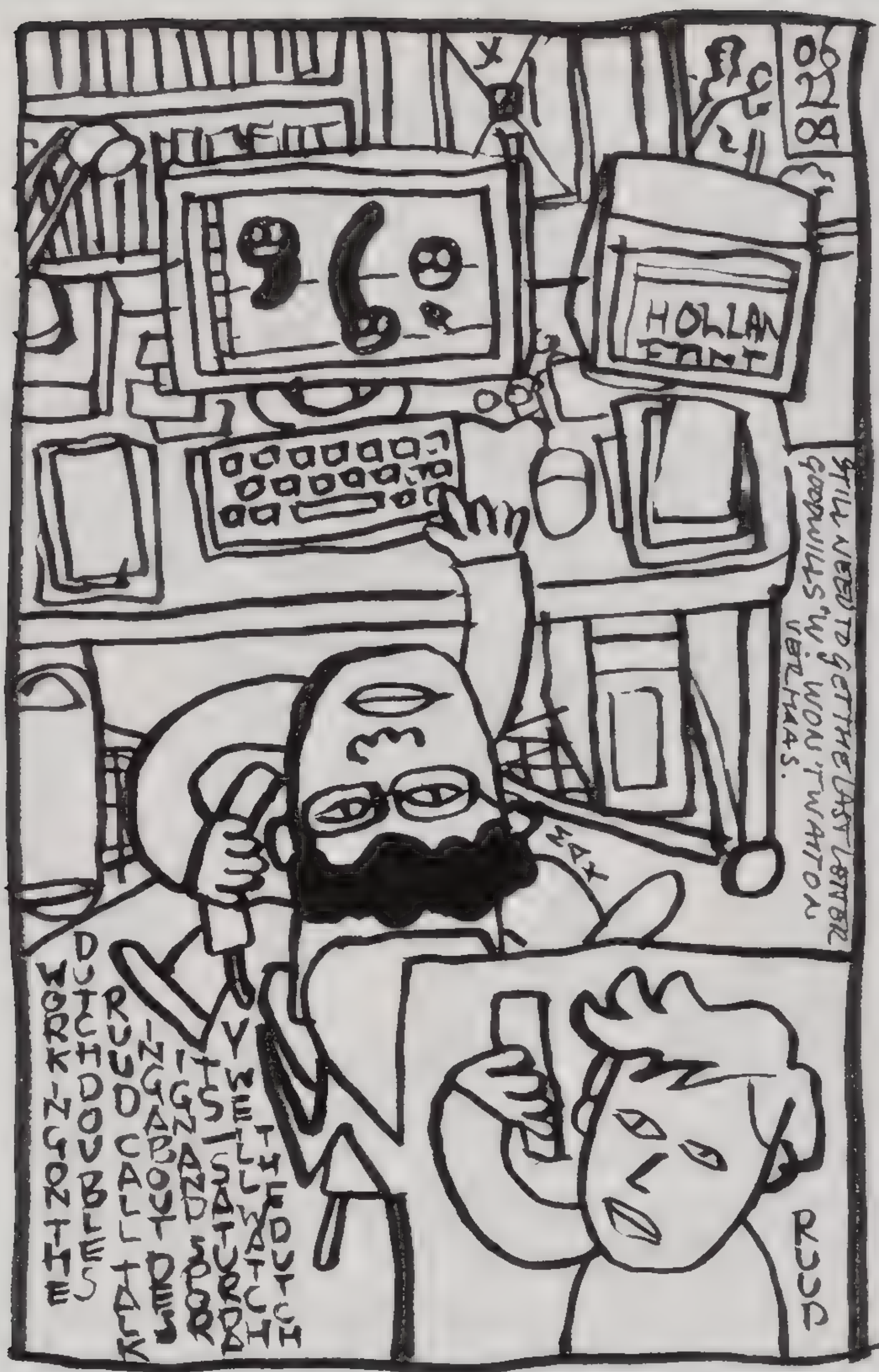
DIARY
DOCUMENTS

FOOD &
BALL!
SOCCER BY SATELLITE

A FEW DAYS IN THE LIFE OF
MAX KISMAN JUNE-JULY 2004

I've been keeping a picture diary since 1986. My motto is: "A drawing a day keeps the doctor away," although it doesn't seem to hold up under all circumstances because some days just aren't exciting enough to record. Currently, the collection numbers about one hundred sketchbooks, each containing 160 pages and measuring four by five inches, a total of roughly 15,000 drawings. I use black Pentel refillable color brushes, which are hard to find in the Bay Area, so I always buy a few when I'm visiting Amsterdam. Rudy always liked my diary illustrations and asked if he could reprint the ones that covered the two weeks of Euro 2004, the European soccer championship, during which he worked on this issue of *Emigre*.

—Max Kisman



This is me in my workroom. I'm working on the Dutch Doubles font, a typeface designed by various type designers for the AIGA symposium "Spaced Out," which I organized. I designed the punctuation and accents because no one else wanted to design those. On my table are two screens: a Mac, for work, and a PC to check my website designs (showing Holland Fonts). In front of me is the bookcase where I keep my diaries. Through the trees I get a glimpse of the Marin Headlands. Rudy's calling, asking if I want to come watch Euro 2004 quarterfinals in Kip's Bar in Berkeley.

06
23
04

RY
ZUZANA
BETH
XAN

WE MET RUDY & ZUZANA AROUND NOON
IN THE CHARLES SCHULZ MUSEUM IN
SANTA ROSA. ACTUALLY HALF HOUR LATE
GOT THE FIRST IN A SERIES OF 24 BOOKS
OF THE COMPLETE COLLECTION. THE MUSE
UM IS TINY SO YOU'RE DONE FAST.
THEN WE DROVE UP TO THE KLN
HOP KLN VINEY TO HAVE A PICK NIK
BUT WAS CLOSED. RUDY KNEW ANOTHER
AMTIO BACK SO WE DROVE THERE
TASTED A FEW GLASSES AND SAT DOWN
IN THE PICKNICK AREA FOR AWHILE.



Beth and I sometimes get together with Rudy and Zuzana, preferably out in the country. Last time, we visited the Charles M. Schulz Museum in Santa Rosa. Afterwards we headed to the wine country for a picnic. In my diary drawings, I like to draw from a bird's-eye perspective. To include myself in the picture I need to tilt my head backwards to indicate my point of view.

06.26.04



Dutch and Swedish soccer fans only got together because of this match. What else could they have in common? I called my mom in Holland to say that I was watching the match live with her. It's the time when she misses my dad the most. They always watched soccer together. The match was very exciting closer to the end, but without any goals. Here's the heroic penalty kick stop by Van der Sar, solidifying the victory. Another shock: Dutch tennis player Schalken defeated the Swedish Enquist at Wimbledon. But a day later he lost to American Andy Roddick.



The Dutch are out of the tournament, their coach resigned, and Greece beat Portugal in the finals. The Sunday BBQ with live music at Rancho Nicasio in the middle of the rolling hills of Marin County offers a great escape if you are not into traditional Fourth of July parades. Beth, Chris, and I were too early. We had lunch and headed to the Pacific coast. We caught up with Rudy, Zuzana, and friends later, missing the first band. Roddick lost to Federer today at Wimbledon, and the Tour de France starts tomorrow.

New Graphic Design Titles from Princeton Architectural Press

EMPIRE: Nozone IX

Nicholas Blechman, editor

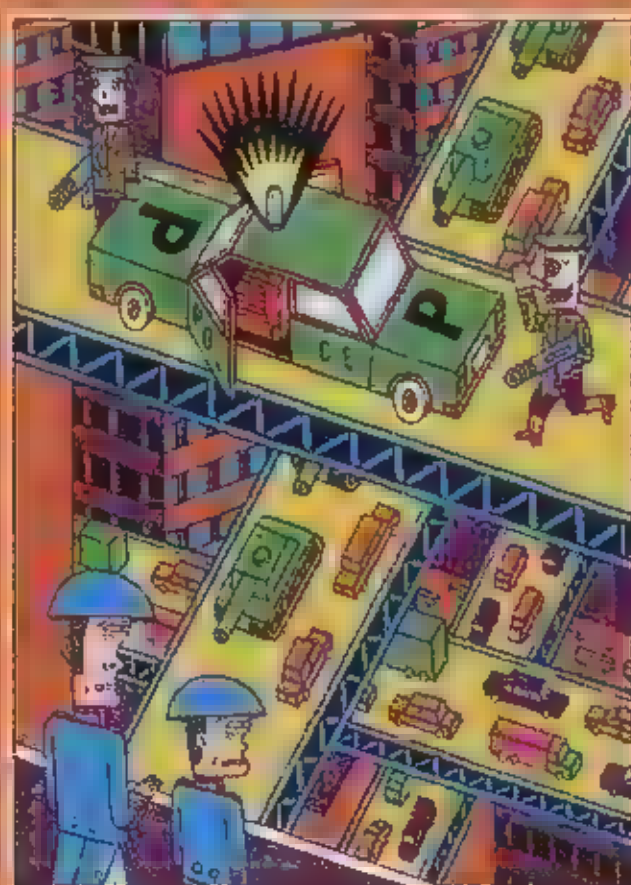
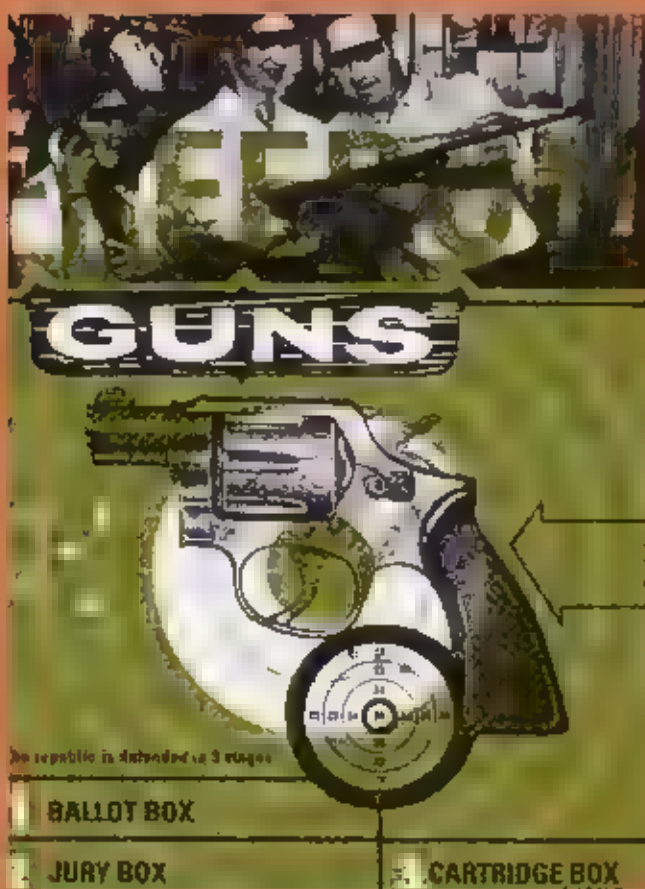
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"Empire contains so much visual texture and verbal angst that it moves beyond comparisons. . . . Like the polemical artwork Blechman directed for the *New York Times* op-ed and art-ed pages, [its] contributors have something to say. They're not just entertaining you, or looking for a laugh. They're trying to get your attention.

"Sometimes they're yelling—Art Chantry's brutal images of technology. On other pages, raw drawings accompany politicians' testimonials, like Paul Sahre's rendition of Condoleeza Rice, 'We need a common enemy to unite us.' Days after putting *Empire* on my bookshelf, whether I turned on the evening news, scanned the newspaper headlines, or overheard political discussion on the bus, each instance reminded me of the conflict facing our nation. *Empire* heightened my awareness."

—Speak Up



THINKING WITH TYPE

A Critical Guide for Designers, Writers, Editors, and Students

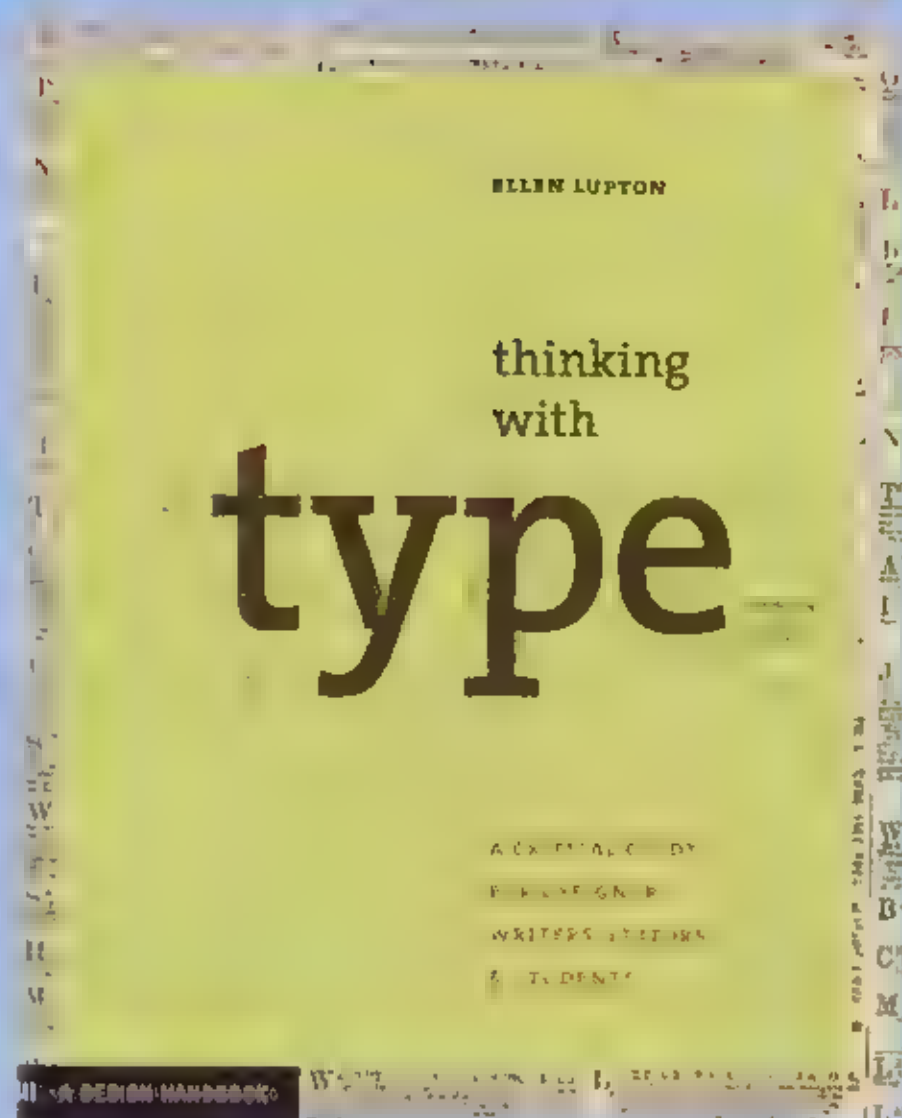
Ellen Lupton

OCTOBER 2004
7 X 8.5, 176 PP, 100 COLOR
FLEXIBIND
\$19.95, £14.99 €20.00

Ellen Lupton, one of America's preeminent design educators, provides clear and concise guidance for anyone learning or brushing up their typographic skills.

Thinking with Type shows readers how to organize letters on a blank sheet or screen. What type of font to use? How big? How should those letters, words, and paragraphs be aligned, spaced, ordered, shaped, and otherwise manipulated? Divided into three sections—letter, text, grid—the book begins with an easy-to-grasp essay that reviews concepts and is then followed by a set of practical exercises that bring the material to life.

Sections conclude with examples of work by leading practitioners that demonstrate creative possibilities along with some classic no-no's to avoid.



GEOMETRY OF DESIGN

Kimberly Elam

AVAILABLE
7 X 8.5, 108 PP, 96 COLOR
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Kimberly Elam takes the reader on a geometrical journey, lending insight and coherence to the design process by exploring the visual relationships that have foundations in mathematics as well as the essential qualities of life.

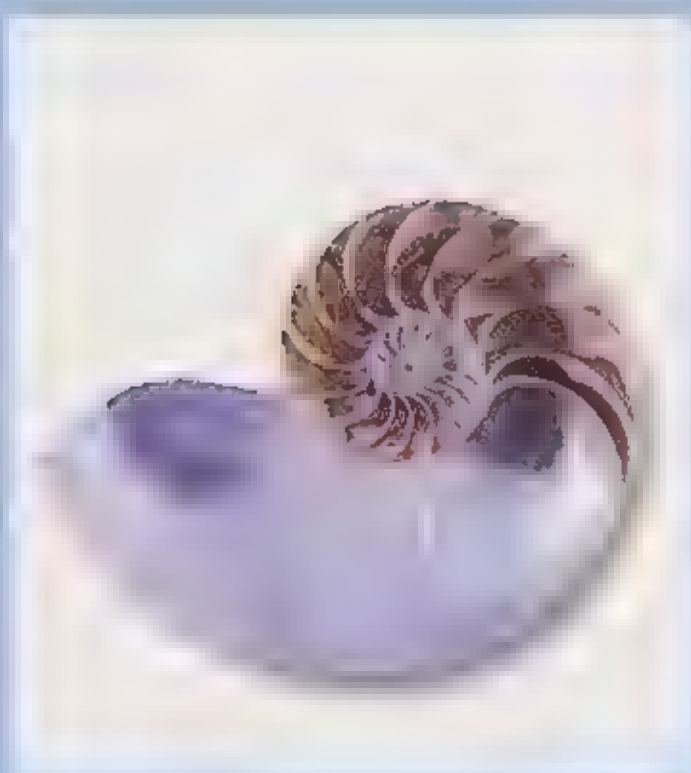
Geometry of Design takes a close look at a broad range of twentieth-century examples of design, architecture, and illustration (from the Barcelona chair to the Musica Viva poster, from the Braun hand-blender to the Conico kettle), revealing underlying geometric structures in their compositions. Explanations and techniques of visual analysis make the inherent mathematical relationships evident and a must-have for anyone involved in graphic arts.

"A fantastically interesting look at the role proportion has played in all manner of design projects. . . . Examples are both informative and insightful, and any designer could benefit from learning or revisiting the rules governing the basics of proportions."

—*Design Issues*

"This book about proportional harmonies is probably the best introduction to the subject. It is beautifully organized, admirably thorough, and, while technical to some extent, not overly so. . . . It's a great little book, one that all teachers and students should see."

—*The Ballast Quarterly Review*



GRID SYSTEMS

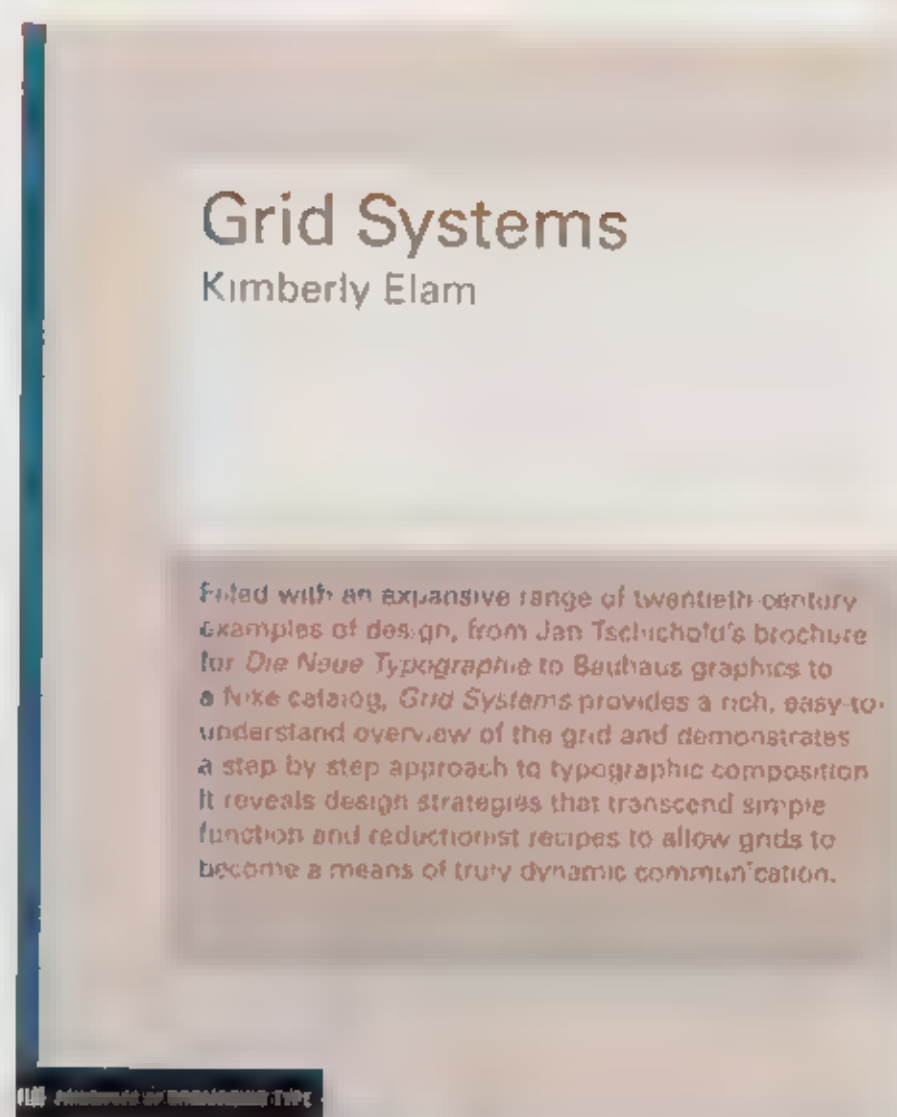
Principles of Organizing Type

Kimberly Elam

Although grid systems are the foundation for almost all typographic design, they are often associated with rigid, formulaic solutions. However, the belief that all great design is nonetheless based on grid systems (even if only subverted ones) suggests that few designers truly understand the complexities and potential riches of grid composition.

Filled with extensive research and more than 100 informative examples from the Bauhaus to Nike ads, *Grid Systems* provides a rich, easy-to-understand overview and demonstrates a step-by-step approach to typographic composition. Any designer, educator, or student will benefit greatly from this elegant slim book, chock-a-block full of colorful examples, helpful vellum overlays, and Elam's insightful analyses.

AUGUST 2004
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\$16.95 £12.99 €17.00



ELEMENTS OF DESIGN

Rowena Reed Kostellow and the Structure of Visual Relationships

Gail Greet Hannah

A hands-on book that design students and designers alike will welcome. *Elements of Design* is a tribute to an exceptional teacher and a study of the abstract visual relationships that were her lifelong pursuit. Rowena Reed Kostellow taught industrial design at Pratt Institute for more than fifty years, and the designers she trained—and the designers they're training today—have changed the face of American design.

"An invaluable resource to students, designers and instructors, the book reconstructs Kostellow's teaching methodology and exercises, which once helped shape American design and now resets the stage to do so again."
—*I.D. Magazine*

AVAILABLE
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160 COLOR PAPERBACK
\$14.95 £11.95 €16.50




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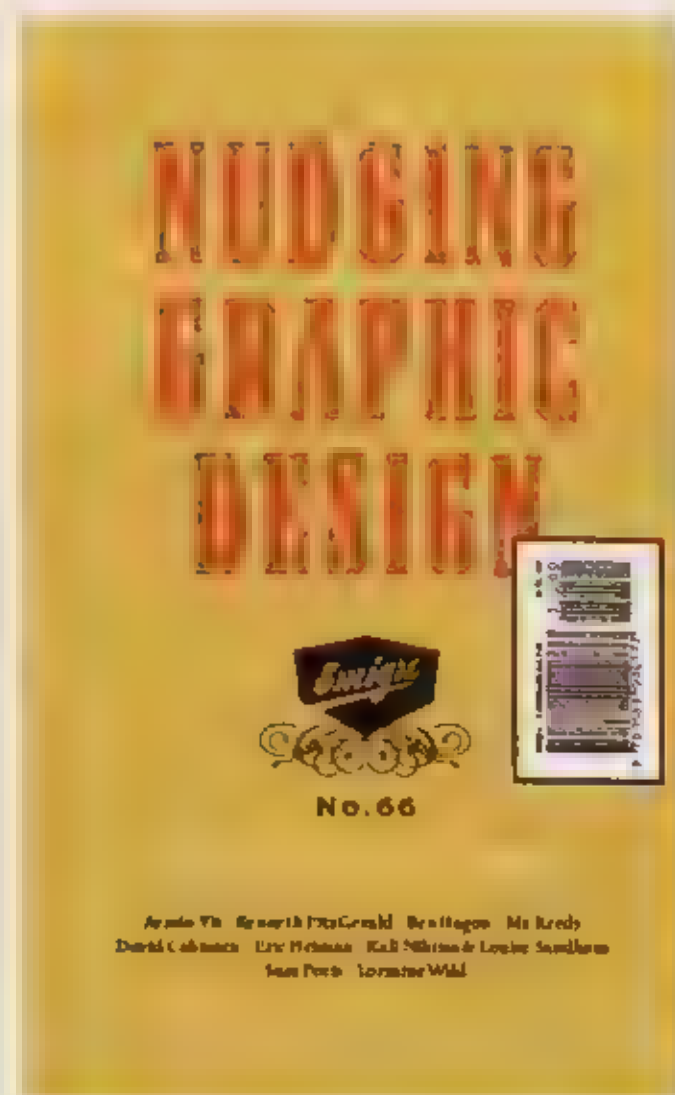
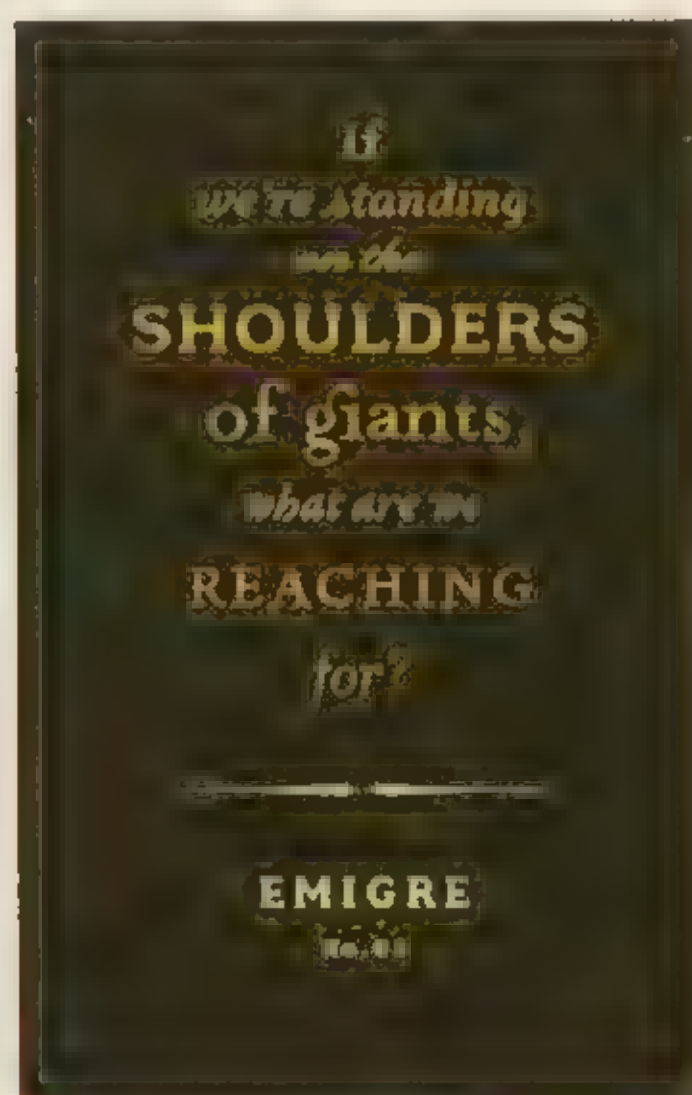
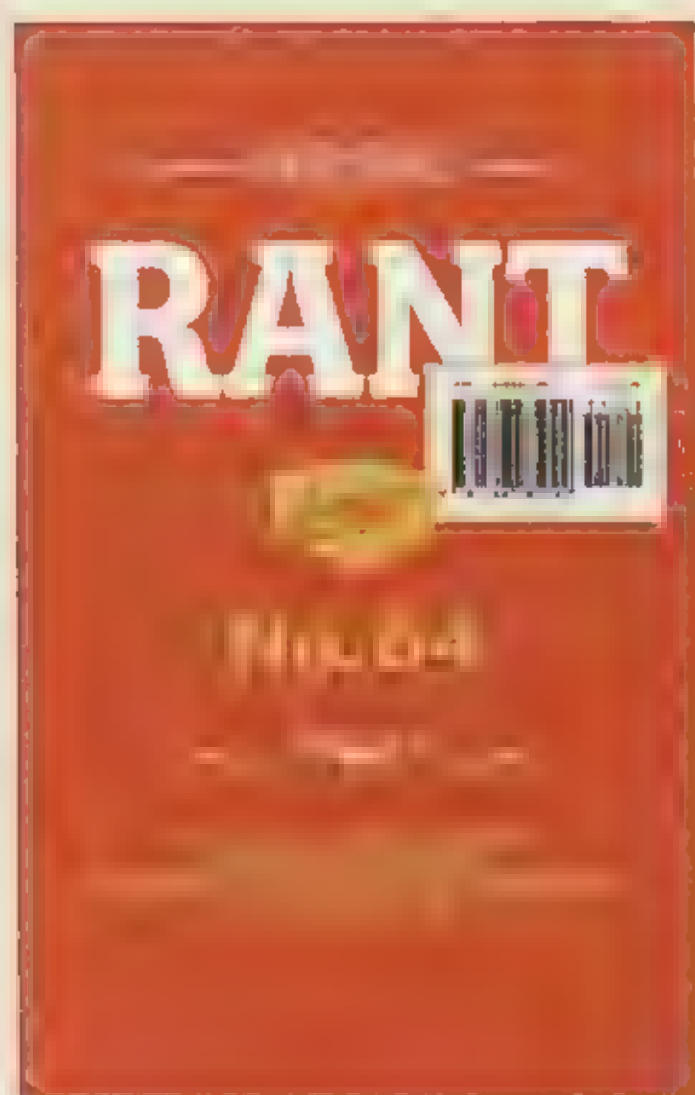
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Emigre Product Info

Emigre Magazine

Emigre is published twice a year with issues coming out in February and August. As of February, 2004, *Emigre* has discontinued selling subscriptions, and will sell only single issues.



Back Issues

Many back issues are available at the regular cover price or less. Collectors' issues (those which are available in very limited quantities) start at \$25.

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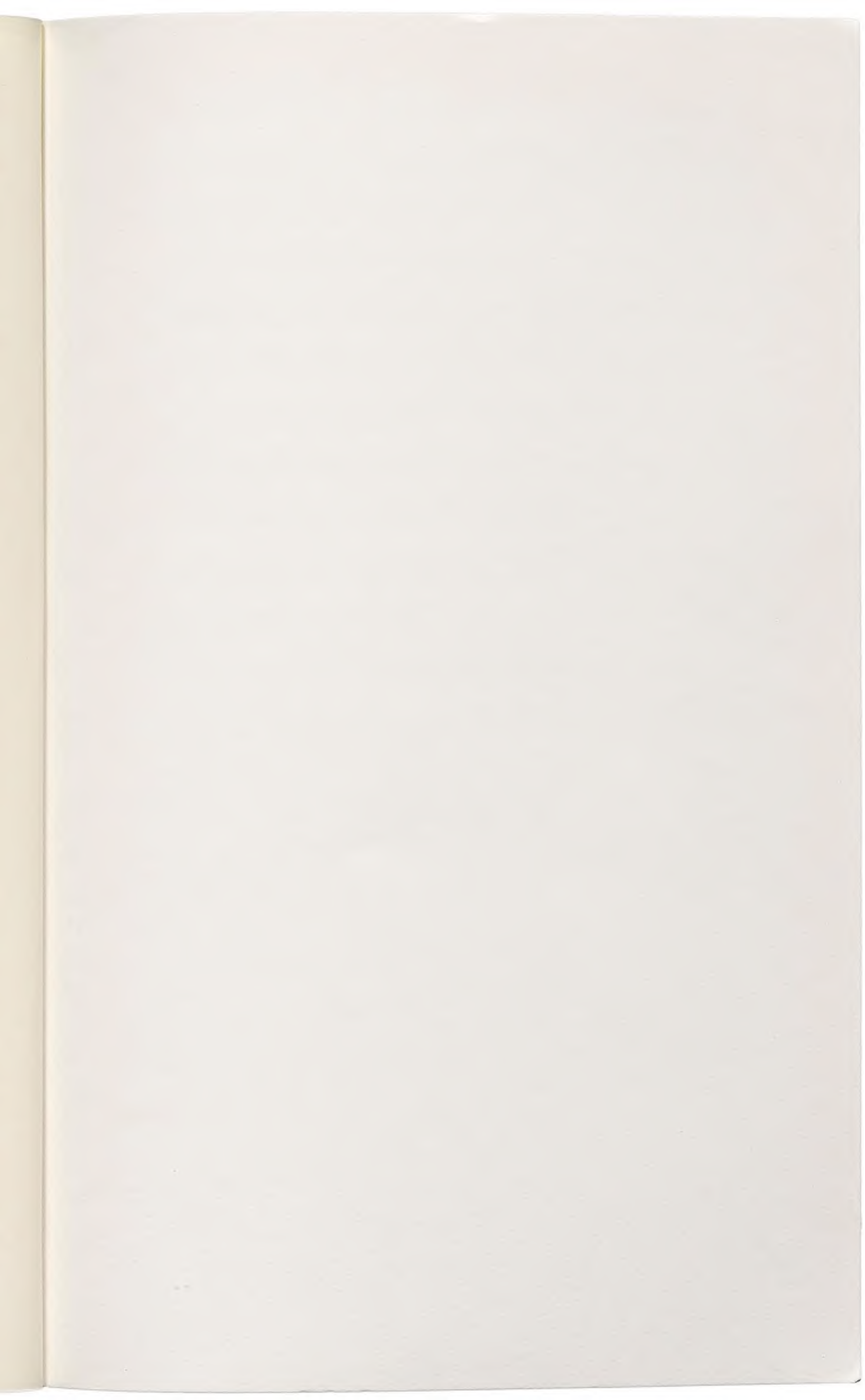
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Yes, design is about analysis and problem-solving, but its fundamental impact on the world (for better or worse) is in the artifacts and form it produces. This is the only way ideas survive in design. To denigrate form and artifact making in design is to destroy its essence and reduce it to a generic role of think tank or consultant.

— RANDY NAKAMURA

The Grand Unified Theory of Nothing, page 49.



As we continue to fall headlong into the market's velvet embrace, we leave behind values and concerns that make our work a force for positive change. This is an enormous price to pay for the steady stream of comforts granted us by a market pleased to know we are on its side. The notion that one can work without edifying one's self is an unforgivable conceit.

— ANTHONY INCIONG